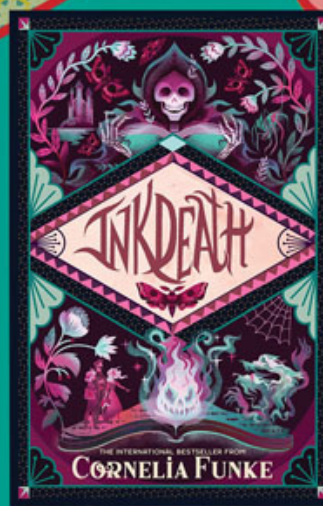
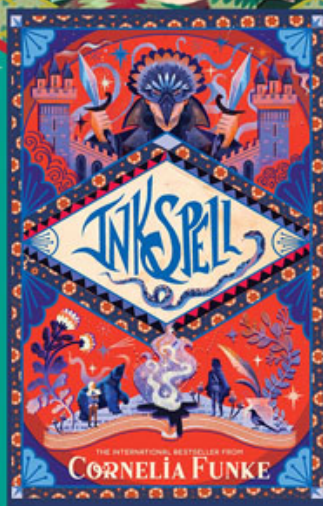




THE COMPLETE

INK

TRILOGY



THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLERS FROM

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CORNELIA FUNKE

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell



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*For Anna, who even put The Lord of the Rings aside
for a while to read this book. Could anyone ask more
of a daughter?*

*And for Elinor, who lent me her name, although I
didn't use it for an elf queen.*

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1

A Stranger in the Night

The moon shone in the rocking horse's eye, and in the mouse's eye, too, when Tolly fetched it out from under his pillow to see. The clock went tick-tock, and in the stillness he thought he heard little bare feet running across the floor, then laughter and whispering, and a sound like the pages of a big book being turned over.

L.M. Boston,
The Children of Green Knowe

Rain fell that night, a fine, whispering rain. Many years later, Meggie had only to close her eyes and she could still hear it, like tiny fingers tapping on the windowpane. A dog barked somewhere in the darkness, and however often she tossed and turned Meggie couldn't get to sleep.

The book she had been reading was under her pillow, pressing its cover against her ear as if to lure her back into its printed pages. 'I'm sure it must be very comfortable sleeping with a hard, rectangular thing like that under your head,' her father had teased, the first time he found a book under her pillow. 'Go on, admit it, the book whispers its story to you at night.'

'Sometimes, yes,' Meggie had said. 'But it only works for children.' Which made Mo tweak her nose. Mo. Meggie had never called her father anything else.

That night – when so much began and so many things changed for ever – Meggie had one of her favourite books under her pillow, and since the rain wouldn't let her sleep she sat up, rubbed the drowsiness from her eyes, and took it out. Its pages rustled promisingly when she opened it. Meggie thought this first whisper sounded a little different from one book to another, depending on whether or not she already knew the story it was going to tell her. But she needed light. She had a box of matches hidden in the drawer of her bedside table. Mo had forbidden her to light candles at night. He didn't like fire. 'Fire devours books,' he always said, but she was twelve years old, she could surely be trusted to keep an eye on a couple of candle flames. Meggie loved to read by candlelight. She had five candlesticks on the windowsill, and she was just holding the lighted match to one of the black wicks when she heard footsteps outside. She blew out the match in alarm – oh, how well she remembered it, even many years later – and knelt to look out of the window, which was wet with rain. Then she saw him.

The rain cast a kind of pallor on the darkness, and the stranger was little more than a shadow. Only his face gleamed white as he looked up at Meggie. His hair clung to his wet forehead. The rain was falling on him, but he ignored it. He stood there motionless, arms crossed over his chest as if that might at least warm him a little. And he kept on staring at the house.

I must go and wake Mo, thought Meggie. But she stayed put, her heart thudding, and went on gazing out into the night as if the stranger's stillness had infected her. Suddenly, he turned his head, and Meggie felt as if he were looking straight into her eyes. She shot off the bed so fast the open book fell to the floor, and she ran barefoot out into the dark corridor. This was the end of May, but it was chilly in the old house.

There was still a light on in Mo's room. He often stayed up reading late into the night. Meggie had inherited her love of

books from her father. When she took refuge from a bad dream with him, nothing could lull her to sleep better than Mo's calm breathing beside her and the sound of the pages turning. Nothing chased nightmares away faster than the rustle of printed paper.

But the figure outside the house was no dream.

The book Mo was reading that night was bound in pale blue linen. Later, Meggie remembered that too. What unimportant little details stick in the memory.

'Mo, there's someone out in the yard!'

Her father raised his head and looked at her with the usual absent expression he wore when she interrupted his reading. It always took him a few moments to find his way out of that other world, the labyrinth of printed letters.

'Someone out in the yard? Are you sure?'

'Yes. He's staring at our house.'

Mo put down his book. 'So what were *you* reading before you went to sleep? *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*?'

Meggie frowned. 'Please, Mo! Come and look.'

He didn't believe her, but he went anyway. Meggie tugged him along the corridor so impatiently that he stubbed his toe on a pile of books, which was hardly surprising. Stacks of books were piled high all over the house – not just arranged in neat rows on bookshelves, the way other people kept them, oh no! The books in Mo and Meggie's house were stacked under tables, on chairs, in the corners of the rooms. There were books in the kitchen and books in the lavatory. Books on the TV set and in the wardrobe, small piles of books, tall piles of books, books thick and thin, books old and new. They welcomed Meggie down to breakfast with invitingly opened pages, they kept boredom at bay when the weather was bad. And sometimes you fell over them.

‘He’s just standing there!’ whispered Meggie, leading Mo into her room.

‘Has he got a hairy face? If so, he could be a werewolf.’

‘Oh, stop it!’ Meggie looked at him sternly, although his jokes made her feel less scared. Already, she hardly believed any more in the figure standing in the rain – until she knelt down again at the window. ‘There! Do you see him?’ she whispered.

Mo looked out through the raindrops running down the pane, and said nothing.

‘Didn’t you promise burglars would never break into our house because there’s nothing here to steal?’ whispered Meggie.

‘He’s not a burglar,’ replied Mo, but as he stepped back from the window his face was so grave that Meggie’s heart thudded faster than ever. ‘Go back to bed, Meggie,’ he said. ‘This visitor has come to see me.’

He left the room before Meggie could ask what kind of visitor, for goodness’ sake, turned up in the middle of the night? She followed him anxiously. As she crept down the corridor she heard her father taking the chain off the front door, and when she reached the hall she saw him standing in the open doorway. The night came in, dark and damp, and the rushing of the rain sounded loud and threatening.

‘Dustfinger!’ called Mo into the darkness. ‘Is that you?’

Dustfinger? What kind of a name was that? Meggie couldn’t remember ever hearing it before, yet it sounded familiar, like a distant memory that wouldn’t take shape properly.

At first, all seemed still outside except for the rain falling, murmuring as if the night had found its voice. But then footsteps approached the house, and the man emerged from the darkness of the yard, his long coat so wet with rain that it clung to his legs. For a split second, as the stranger stepped into the light spilling out of the house, Meggie thought she saw a small

furry head over his shoulder, snuffling as it looked out of his rucksack and then quickly disappearing back into it.

Dustfinger wiped his wet face with his sleeve and offered Mo his hand.

‘How are you, Silvertongue?’ he asked. ‘It’s been a long time.’

Hesitantly, Mo took the outstretched hand. ‘A very long time,’ he said, looking past his visitor as if he expected to see another figure emerge from the night. ‘Come in, you’ll catch your death. Meggie says you’ve been standing out there for some time.’

‘Meggie? Ah yes, of course.’ Dustfinger let Mo lead him into the house. He scrutinised Meggie so thoroughly that she felt quite embarrassed and didn’t know where to look. In the end she just stared back.

‘She’s grown.’

‘You remember her?’

‘Of course.’

Meggie noticed that Mo double-locked the door.

‘How old is she now?’ Dustfinger smiled at her. It was a strange smile. Meggie couldn’t decide whether it was mocking, supercilious, or just awkward. She didn’t smile back. ‘Twelve,’ said Mo.

‘Twelve? My word!’ Dustfinger pushed his dripping hair back from his forehead. It reached almost to his shoulders. Meggie wondered what colour it was when it was dry. The stubble round his narrow-lipped mouth was gingery, like the fur of the stray cat Meggie sometimes fed with a saucer of milk outside the door. Ginger hair sprouted on his cheeks, too, sparse as a boy’s first beard but not long enough to hide three long, pale scars. They made Dustfinger’s face look as if it had been smashed and stuck back together again. ‘Twelve,’ he repeated. ‘Of course. She was ... let’s see, she was three then, wasn’t she?’

Mo nodded. ‘Come on, I’ll find you some dry clothes.’ Impatiently, as if he were suddenly in a hurry to hide the man

from Meggie, he led his visitor across the hall. 'And Meggie,' he said over his shoulder, 'you go back to sleep.' Then, without another word, he closed his workshop door.

Meggie stood there rubbing her cold feet together. Go back to sleep. Sometimes, when they'd stayed up late yet again, Mo would toss her down on her bed like a bag of walnuts. Sometimes he chased her round the house after supper until she escaped into her room, breathless with laughter. And sometimes he was so tired he lay down on the sofa and she made him a cup of coffee before she went to bed. But he had never *ever* sent her off to her room so brusquely.

A foreboding, clammy and fearful, came into her heart as if, along with the visitor whose name was so strange yet somehow familiar, some menace had slipped into her life. And she wished – so hard it frightened her – that she had never fetched Mo, and Dustfinger had stayed outside until the rain washed him away.

When the door of the workshop opened again she jumped.

'Still there, I see,' said Mo. 'Go to bed, Meggie. Please.' He had that little frown over his nose that appeared only when something was really worrying him, and he seemed to look straight through her as if his thoughts were somewhere else entirely. The foreboding in Meggie's heart grew, spreading black wings.

'Send him away, Mo!' she said as he gently propelled her towards her room. 'Please! Send him away. I don't like him.'

Mo leaned in her open doorway. 'He'll be gone when you get up in the morning. Word of honour.'

'Word of honour – no crossed fingers?' Meggie looked him straight in the eye. She could always tell when Mo was lying, however hard he tried to hide it from her.

'No crossed fingers,' he said, holding both hands out to show her.

Then he closed her door, even though he knew she didn't like that. Meggie put her ear to it, listening. She could hear the clink of china. So the man with the sandy beard was getting a nice cup of tea to warm him up. I hope he catches pneumonia, thought Meggie ... though he needn't necessarily die of it. Meggie heard the kettle whistling in the kitchen, and Mo carrying a tray of clattering crockery back to the workshop. When that door closed she forced herself to wait a few more seconds, just to be on the safe side. Then she crept back out into the passage.

There was a notice hanging on the door of Mo's workshop, a small metal plaque. Meggie knew the words on it by heart. When she was five she had often practised reading the old-fashioned, spindly lettering:

*Some books should be tasted
some devoured,
but only a few
should be chewed and digested thoroughly.*

Back then, when she still had to climb on a box to read the plaque, she had thought the chewing and digesting were meant literally and wondered, horrified, why Mo had hung on his workshop door the words of someone who vandalised books. Now, she knew what the plaque really meant, but tonight she wasn't interested in written words. Spoken words were what she wanted to hear, the words being exchanged in soft, almost inaudible whispers by the two men on the other side of the door.

'Don't underestimate him!' she heard Dustfinger say. His voice was so different from Mo's. No one else in the world had a voice like her father's. Mo could paint pictures in the empty air with his voice alone.

'He'd do anything to get hold of it.' That was Dustfinger again. 'And when I say anything, I can assure you I mean *anything*.'

‘I’ll never let him have it.’ That was Mo.

‘He’ll still get his hands on it, one way or another! I tell you, they’re on your trail.’

‘It wouldn’t be the first time. I’ve always managed to shake them off before.’

‘Oh yes? And for how much longer, do you think? What about your daughter? Are you telling me she actually likes moving around the whole time? Believe me, I know what I’m talking about.’

It was so quiet behind the door that Meggie scarcely dared breathe in case the two men heard her.

Finally her father spoke again, hesitantly, as if his tongue found it difficult to form the words. ‘Then what do you think I ought to do?’

‘Come with me. I’ll take you to them.’ A cup clinked. The sound of a spoon against china. How loud small noises sound in a silence. ‘You know how much Capricorn thinks of your talents. He’d be glad if you took it to him of your own free will, I’m sure he would. The man he found to replace you is useless.’

Capricorn. Another peculiar name. Dustfinger had uttered it as if the mere sound might scorch his tongue. Meggie wriggled her chilly toes and wrinkled her cold nose. She didn’t understand much of what the two men were saying, but she tried to memorise every single word of it.

It was quiet again in the workshop.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Mo at last. He sounded so weary that it tore at Meggie’s heart. ‘I’ll have to think about it. When do you think his men will get here?’

‘Soon!’

The word dropped like a stone into the silence.

‘Soon,’ repeated Mo. ‘Very well. I’ll have made up my mind by tomorrow. Do you have somewhere to sleep?’

‘Oh, I can always find a place,’ replied Dustfinger. ‘I’m managing quite well these days, although it’s still all much too fast for me.’ His laugh was not a happy one. ‘But I’d like to know what you decide. May I come back tomorrow? About midday?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ll be picking Meggie up from school at one-thirty. Come after that.’

Meggie heard a chair being pushed back, and scurried back to her room. When the door of the workshop opened she was just closing her bedroom door behind her. Pulling the covers up to her chin, she lay there listening as her father said goodbye to Dustfinger.

‘And thank you for the warning anyway,’ she heard him add as Dustfinger’s footsteps moved away, slowly and uncertainly as if he were reluctant to leave, as if he hadn’t said everything he’d wanted to say. But at last he was gone, and only the rain kept drumming its wet fingers on Meggie’s window.

When Mo opened the door of her room she quickly closed her eyes and tried to breathe as slowly as you do in a deep, innocent sleep. But Mo wasn’t stupid. In fact, he was sometimes terribly clever.

‘Meggie, put one of your feet out of bed,’ he told her. Reluctantly, she stuck her toes out from under the blanket and laid them in Mo’s warm hand. They were still cold.

‘I knew it!’ he said. ‘You’ve been spying. Can’t you do as I tell you, just for once?’ Sighing, he tucked her foot back underneath the nice warm blankets. Then he sat down on her bed, passed his hands over his tired face and looked out of the window. His hair was as dark as moleskin. Meggie had fair hair like her mother, who she knew only from a few faded photographs. ‘You should be glad you look more like her than me,’ Mo always said. ‘My head wouldn’t look at all good on a girl’s neck.’ But Meggie wished she did look more like him. There wasn’t a face in the world she loved more.

‘I didn’t hear what you were saying anyway,’ she murmured.

‘Good.’ Mo stared out of the window as if Dustfinger were still standing in the yard. Then he rose and went to the door. ‘Try to get some sleep,’ he said.

But Meggie didn’t want to sleep. ‘Dustfinger! What sort of a name is that?’ she asked. ‘And why does he call you Silvertongue?’

Mo did not reply.

‘And this person who’s looking for you – I heard what Dustfinger called him. Capricorn. Who is he?’

‘No one you want to meet.’ Her father didn’t turn round. ‘I thought you didn’t hear anything. Goodnight, Meggie.’

This time he left her door open. The light from the passage fell on her bed, mingling with the darkness of the night that seeped in through the window, and Meggie lay there waiting for the dark to disappear and take her fear of some evil menace away with it. Only later did she understand that the evil had not appeared for the first time that night. It had just slunk back in again.



2

Secrets

**‘What do these children do without storybooks?’
Naftali asked.**

**And Reb Zebulun replied: ‘They have to make do.
Storybooks aren’t bread. You can live without them.’**

‘I couldn’t live without them,’ Naftali said.

**Isaac Bashevis Singer,
*Naftali the Storyteller and his Horse Sus***

It was early dawn when Meggie woke up. Night was fading over the fields as if the rain had washed the darkness out of the hem of its garment. The alarm clock said just before five, and Meggie was going to turn over and go back to sleep when she suddenly sensed someone else in the room. Startled, she sat up and saw Mo standing by her open wardrobe.

‘Hello,’ he said, putting her favourite sweater in a case. ‘I’m sorry, I know it’s very early, but we have to leave. How about cocoa for breakfast?’

Still drowsy with sleep, Meggie nodded. Outside, the birds were twittering loudly as if they’d been awake for hours. Mo put two more pairs of jeans in her case, closed it and carried it to the door. ‘Wear something warm,’ he said. ‘It’s chilly outside.’

‘Where are we going?’ asked Meggie, but he had already disappeared. She looked out of the window, feeling confused.

She almost expected to see Dustfinger, but there was only a blackbird in the yard hopping over the stones, which were wet after the rain. Meggie put on her jeans and stumbled into the kitchen. Two suitcases, a travelling bag and Mo's toolbox stood out in the hall.

Her father was sitting at the kitchen table making sandwiches for the journey. When she came into the kitchen he looked up briefly and smiled at her, but Meggie could see he was worried about something. 'Mo, we can't go away now!' she said. 'The school holidays don't start for another week!'

'Well, it won't be the first time I've had to go away on business in your term-time.'

He was right about that. In fact, he went away quite often, whenever an antique dealer, a book collector or a library needed a bookbinder and commissioned Mo to restore a few valuable old books, freeing them of dust and mould or dressing them in new clothes, as he put it. Meggie didn't think the word 'bookbinder' described Mo's work particularly well, and a few years ago she had made him a notice to hang on his workshop door saying 'Mortimer Folchart, Book Doctor'. And the book doctor never called on his patients without taking his daughter too. They had always done that and they always would, never mind what Meggie's teachers said.

'How about chicken-pox? Have I used that excuse already?'

'Yes, last time. When we had to go and see that dreary man with the Bibles.' Meggie scrutinised her father's face. 'Mo. Is it ... is it because of last night we have to leave?'

For a moment she thought he was going to tell her everything – whatever there was to tell. But then he shook his head. 'No, of course not,' he said, putting the sandwiches he had made in a plastic bag. 'Your mother has an aunt called Elinor. We visited her once, when you were very small. She's been wanting me to come and put her books in order for a long time. She lives beside a lake in the north of Italy, I always forget which lake,

but it's a lovely place, a day's drive away.' He did not look at her as he spoke.

Meggie wanted to ask: but why do we have to go now? But she didn't. Nor did she ask if he had forgotten that he was meeting someone at midday. She was too afraid of the answers – and she didn't want Mo to lie to her again.

'Is this aunt as peculiar as the others?' was all she said. Mo had already taken her to visit various relations. Both he and Meggie's mother had large families whose homes, so far as Meggie could see, were scattered over half of Europe.

Mo smiled. 'Yes, she is a bit peculiar, but you'll get on with her all right. She has some really wonderful books.'

'So how long are we going to be away?'

'It could be quite some time.'

Meggie sipped her cocoa. It was so hot that she burned her lips, and had to quickly press the cold blade of a knife to her mouth.

Mo pushed his chair back. 'I have to pack a few more things from the workshop,' he said. 'It won't take long. You must be very tired, but you can sleep once we're in the van.'

Meggie just nodded and looked out of the kitchen window. It was a grey morning. Mist drifted over the fields at the foot of the nearby hills, and Meggie felt as if the shadows of the night were still hiding among the trees.

'Pack up the food and take plenty to read!' Mo called from the hall. As if she didn't always! Years ago he had made her a box to hold her favourite books on all their journeys, short and long, near and far. 'It's a good idea to have your own books with you in a strange place,' Mo always said. He himself always took at least a dozen.

Mo had painted the box poppy-red. Poppies were Meggie's favourite flower. They pressed well between the pages of a book, and you could stamp a star-shaped pattern on your skin

with their pepper-pot seed capsules. He had decorated the box and painted *Meggie's Treasure Chest* in lovely curly lettering on the lid. The box was lined with shiny black taffeta, but you could hardly see any of the fabric because Meggie had a great many favourite books, and she always added another whenever they travelled anywhere. 'If you take a book with you on a journey,' Mo had said when he put the first one in her box, 'an odd thing happens: the book begins collecting your memories. And forever after you have only to open that book to be back where you first read it. It will all come into your mind with the very first words: the sights you saw in that place, what it smelled like, the ice-cream you ate while you were reading it ... yes, books are like flypapers. Memories cling to the printed page better than anything else.'

He was probably right, but there was another reason why Meggie took her books whenever they went away. They were her home when she was somewhere strange – familiar voices, friends that never quarrelled with her, clever, powerful friends, daring and knowledgeable, tried and tested adventurers who had travelled far and wide. Her books cheered her up when she was sad, and kept her from being bored while Mo cut leather and fabric to the right size, and re-stitched old pages that over countless years had grown fragile from the many fingers leafing through them.

Some of her books always went away with Meggie. Others were left at home because they weren't right for where she was going, or to make room for new, unknown stories that she hadn't yet read.

Meggie stroked their curved spines. Which books should she take this time? Which stories would help to drive away the fear that had crept into the house last night? I know, thought Meggie, why not a story about telling lies? Mo told her lies. He told terrible lies, even though he knew that every time he told one she looked hard at his nose. *Pinocchio*, thought Meggie. No, too sinister. And too sad. But she wanted something exciting, a

story to drive all other thoughts out of her head, even the darkest. *The Witches*, yes. She'd take the bald-headed witches who turn children into mice – and *The Odyssey*, with the Cyclops and the enchantress who transforms his warriors into pigs. Her journey could hardly be more dangerous than his, could it?

On the left-hand side of the box there were two picture books that Meggie had used when she was teaching herself to read – five years old, she'd been, and you could still see where her tiny forefinger had moved over the pages – and right at the bottom, hidden under all the others, were the books Meggie had made herself. She had spent days sticking them together and cutting up the paper, she had painted picture after picture, and Mo had to write what they were underneath them. *An Angel With a Happy Face, from Meggi for Mo*. She had written her name herself, although back then she always left the 'e' off the end. Meggie looked at the clumsy lettering and put the little book back in the box. Mo had helped her with the binding, of course. He had bound all her home-made books in brightly patterned paper, and he had given her a stamp for the others so that she could print her name and the head of a unicorn on the title page, sometimes in black ink and sometimes in red, depending how she felt. But Mo had never read aloud to her from her books. Not once.

He had tossed Meggie up in the air, he had carried her round the house on his shoulders, he had taught her how to make a bookmark of blackbird's feathers. But he had never read aloud to her. Never once, not a single word, however often she put books on his lap. Meggie just had to teach herself how to decipher the black marks and open the treasure chest.

She straightened up. There was still a little room in the box. Perhaps Mo had a new book she could take, a specially big, fat, wonderful book ...

The door to his workshop was closed.

‘Mo?’ Meggie pressed the handle down. The long table where he worked had been swept clean, with not a stamp, nor a knife in sight. Mo had packed everything. Had he been lying after all?

Meggie went into the workshop and looked around. The door to the Treasury was open. The Treasury was really just a lumber-room, but Meggie had given the little cubby-hole that name because it was where her father stored his most precious materials: the finest leather, the most beautiful fabrics, marbled paper, stamps to print patterns in gold on soft leather ... Meggie put her head round the open door and saw Mo covering a book with brown paper. It was not a particularly large book, and not especially fat. The green linen binding looked worn, but that was all Meggie could see, because Mo quickly hid the book behind his back as soon as he noticed her.

‘What are you doing here?’ he snapped.

‘I—’ For a moment Meggie was speechless with shock, Mo’s face was so dark. ‘I only wanted to ask if you had a new book for me. I’ve read all the ones in my room, and ...’

Mo passed his hand over his face. ‘Yes, of course. I’m sure I can find something,’ he said, but his eyes were still saying: go away, go away, Meggie. And the brown paper crackled behind his back. ‘I’ll be with you in a moment,’ he said. ‘I have a few more things to pack. OK?’

A little later he brought her three books, but the one he had been covering with brown paper wasn’t one of them.

An hour later, they were taking everything out into the yard. Meggie shivered when she stepped out of doors. It was a chilly morning after the night’s rain, and the sun hung in the sky like a pale coin lost by someone high up in the clouds.

They had been living in the old farmhouse for just under a year. Meggie liked the view of the surrounding hills, the swallows’ nests under the roof, the dried-up well that yawned

darkly as if it went straight down to the Earth's core. The house itself had always been too big and draughty for her liking, with all those empty rooms full of fat spiders, but the rent was low and Mo had enough space for his books and his workshop. There was a hen-house outside, and the barn, which now housed only their old camper van, would have been perfect for a couple of cows or a horse. 'Cows have to be milked, Meggie,' Mo had said when she suggested keeping a couple. 'Very, very early in the morning. Every day.'

'Well, what about a horse?' she had asked. 'Even Pippi Longstocking has a horse, and she doesn't have a stable.'

She'd have been happy with a few chickens or a goat, but they too had to be fed every day, and she and Mo went away too often for that. So Meggie had only the ginger cat who sometimes came visiting when it couldn't be bothered to compete with the dogs on the farm next door. The grumpy old farmer who lived there was their only neighbour. Sometimes his dogs howled so pitifully that Meggie put her hands over her ears. It was twenty minutes by bike to the nearest village, where she went to school and where two of her friends lived, but Mo usually took her in the van because it was a lonely ride along a narrow road that wound past nothing but fields and dark trees.

'What on earth have you packed in here? Bricks?' asked Mo as he carried Meggie's book-box out of the house.

'You're the one who says books have to be heavy because the whole world's inside them,' said Meggie, making him laugh for the first time that morning.

The camper van, standing in the abandoned barn like a solid, multicoloured animal, was more familiar to Meggie than any of the houses where she and Mo had lived. She never slept more deeply and soundly than in the bed he had made in it for her. There was a table too, of course, a kitchen tucked into a corner and a bench to sit on. When you lifted the seat of the bench

there were travel guides, road maps and well-worn paperbacks under it.

Yes, Meggie was fond of the van, but this morning she hesitated to get in. When Mo finally went back to the house to lock the door, she suddenly felt that they would never come back here, that this journey was going to be different from any other, that they would drive further and further away, in flight from something that had no name. Or at least none that Mo was about to tell her.

‘Very well, off we go south,’ was all he said as he got behind the steering wheel. And so they set off, without saying goodbye to anyone, on a morning that still seemed much too early and smelled of rain.

But Dustfinger was waiting for them at the gate.



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3

Going South

‘Beyond the Wild Wood comes the Wild World,’ said the Rat. ‘And that’s something that doesn’t matter, either to you or to me. I’ve never been there, and I’m never going, nor you either, if you’ve got any sense at all.’

**Kenneth Grahame,
*The Wind in the Willows***

Dustfinger must have been waiting in the road beyond the wall. Meggie had picked her precarious way along the top of that wall hundreds of times, up to the rusty hinges of the gate and back again, eyes tightly closed so that she could get a clearer view of the tiger she’d imagined waiting in the bamboo at the foot of the wall, his eyes yellow as amber, or the foaming rapids to her right and her left.

Only Dustfinger was there now, but no other sight could have made Meggie’s heart beat faster. He appeared so suddenly that Mo almost ran him down. He wore only a sweater, and he was shivering, with his arms folded over his chest. His coat was probably still damp from last night’s rain, but his hair was dry now – a ruffled, sandy mop above his scarred face.

Mo swore under his breath, switched off the engine and got out of the van.

Smiling his strange smile, Dustfinger leaned back against the wall. ‘Where are you going in such a hurry, Silvertongue?’

Didn't we have a date?' he asked. 'You stood me up like this once before, remember?'

'You know why I'm in a hurry,' replied Mo. 'For the same reason as last time.' He was still standing by the open door of the van, looking tense, as if he couldn't wait for Dustfinger to get out of the way. But Dustfinger pretended not to notice Mo's impatience.

'Then may I know where you're going?' he enquired. 'It took me four years to find you last time, and if luck hadn't been on your side Capricorn's men would have got to you first.' When he glanced at Meggie she stared back icily.

Mo was silent for a while. 'Capricorn is in the north,' he answered at last. 'So we're going south. Or has he taken up residence somewhere else now?'

Dustfinger looked down the road. Last night's rain shone in the potholes. 'No, no,' he said. 'No, he's still in the north. Or so I hear, and since you've obviously made up your mind to go on refusing him what he wants I'd better go south myself as fast as I can. Heaven knows I don't want to be the one to give Capricorn's men the bad news. So, if you'd give me a lift part of the way? ... I'm ready to leave.' The two bags he picked up from where they stood by the wall looked as if they'd been all round the world a dozen times. Apart from the bags, Dustfinger had nothing but his rucksack with him.

Meggie compressed her lips.

No, Mo, she thought, no, let's not take him! But she had only to look at her father to know that his answer would be different.

'Oh, come on, Silvertongue!' said Dustfinger. 'What am I going to tell Capricorn's men if I fall into their hands?'

He looked lost, standing there like a stray dog. And hard as Meggie tried to see something sinister about him she couldn't, not in the pale morning light. All the same, she didn't want him

to go with them. Her face showed that very clearly, but neither of the two men took any notice of her.

‘Believe me, I couldn’t keep the fact that I’ve seen you from them for very long,’ Dustfinger continued. ‘And anyway ...’ he hesitated before completing his sentence, ‘you still owe me, don’t you?’

Mo bowed his head. Meggie saw his hand closing more firmly round the open door of the van. ‘If you want to look at it like that,’ he said, ‘yes, I suppose I do still owe you.’

The relief was plain to see on Dustfinger’s scarred face. He quickly hoisted his rucksack over his shoulders and came over to the van with his bags.

‘Wait a minute!’ cried Meggie, as Mo moved to help him. ‘If he’s coming with us then I want to know why we’re running away. Who is this man called Capricorn?’

Mo turned to her. ‘Meggie,’ he began in the tone she knew only too well: Meggie, don’t be so silly, it meant. Come along now, Meggie.

She opened the van door and jumped out.

‘Meggie, for heaven’s sake! Get back in! We have to leave!’

‘I’m not getting back in until you tell me.’

Mo came towards her but Meggie slipped away, and ran through the gate into the road.

‘Why won’t you tell me?’ she cried.

The road was deserted, as if there were no other human beings in the world. A slight breeze had risen, caressing Meggie’s face and rustling in the leaves of the lime tree that grew by the roadside. The sky was still wan and grey, and refused to clear.

‘I want to know what’s going on!’ cried Meggie. ‘I want to know why we had to get up at five o’clock, and why I don’t have to go to school. I want to know if we’re ever coming back, and I want to know who this Capricorn is!’

When she spoke the name Mo looked round as if the man with the strange name, the man he and Dustfinger obviously feared so much, might step out of the empty barn next moment as suddenly as Dustfinger had emerged from behind the wall. But the yard was empty, and Meggie was too furious to feel frightened of someone when she knew nothing about him other than his name. 'You've always told me everything!' she shouted at her father. 'Always.'

But Mo was still silent. 'Everyone has a few secrets, Meggie,' he said at last. 'Now, come along, do get in. We have to leave.'

Dustfinger looked first at Mo, then at Meggie, with an expression of incredulity on his face. 'You haven't told her?' Meggie heard him ask in a low voice.

Mo shook his head.

'But you have to tell her something! It's dangerous for her not to know. She's not a baby any more.'

'It's dangerous for her to know too,' said Mo. 'And it wouldn't change anything.'

Meggie was still standing in the road.

'I heard all that!' she cried. 'What's dangerous? I'm not getting in until you tell me.'

Mo still said nothing.

Dustfinger looked at him, uncertain for a moment, then put down his bags. 'Very well,' he said. 'Then I'll tell her about Capricorn myself.'

He came slowly towards Meggie, who involuntarily stepped back.

'You met him once,' said Dustfinger. 'It's a long time ago, you won't remember, you were so little.' He held his hand at knee-height in the air. 'How can I explain what he's like? If you were to see a cat eating a young bird I expect you'd cry, wouldn't you? Or try to help the bird. Capricorn would feed the bird to the cat on purpose, just to watch it being torn apart, and the

little creature's screeching and struggling would be as sweet as honey to him.'

Meggie took another step backwards, but Dustfinger kept advancing towards her.

'I don't suppose you'd get any fun from terrifying people until their knees were so weak they could hardly stand?' he asked. 'Nothing gives Capricorn more pleasure. And I don't suppose you think you can just help yourself to anything you want, never mind what or where. Capricorn does. Unfortunately, your father has something Capricorn has set his heart on.'

Meggie glanced at Mo, but he just stood there looking at her.

'Capricorn can't bind books like your father,' Dustfinger went on. 'In fact, he's not much good at anything except terrifying people. But he's a master of that art. It's his whole life. I doubt if he himself has any idea what it's like to be so paralysed by fear that you feel small and insignificant. But he knows just how to arouse that fear and spread it, in people's homes and their beds, in their heads and their hearts. His men spread fear abroad like the Black Death, they push it under doors and through letterboxes, they paint it on walls and stable doors until it infects everything around it of its own accord, silent and stinking like a plague.' Dustfinger was very close to Meggie now. 'Capricorn has many men,' he said softly. 'Most have been with him since they were children, and if Capricorn were to order one of them to cut off your nose or one of your ears he'd do it without batting an eyelid. They like to dress in black like rooks – only their leader wears a white shirt under his black jacket – and should you ever meet any of them then make yourself small, very small, and hope they don't notice you. Understand?'

Meggie nodded. Her heart was pounding so hard that she could scarcely breathe.

'I can see why your father has never told you about Capricorn,' said Dustfinger, looking at Mo. 'If I had children I'd

rather tell them about nice people too.'

'I know the world's not just full of nice people!' Meggie couldn't keep her voice from shaking with anger, and more than a touch of fear.

'Oh yes? How do you know that?' There it was again, that mysterious smile, sad and supercilious at the same time. 'Have you ever had anything to do with a real villain?'

'I've read about them.'

Dustfinger laughed aloud. 'Yes, of course that almost comes to the same thing!' he said. His mockery hurt like stinging nettles. He bent down to Meggie and looked her in the face. 'All the same, I hope reading about them is as close as you ever get,' he said quietly.

Mo was stowing Dustfinger's bags in the back of the van.

'I hope there's nothing in there that might come flying round our heads,' he said as Dustfinger got in the back seat behind Meggie. 'With your trade I wouldn't be surprised.'

Before Meggie could ask what trade that was, Dustfinger opened his rucksack and carefully lifted out an animal. It was blinking sleepily. 'Since we obviously have quite a long journey ahead of us,' he told Mo, 'I'd like to introduce someone to your daughter.'

The creature was almost the size of a rabbit, but much thinner, with a bushy tail now draped over Dustfinger's chest like a fur collar. It dug its slender claws into his sleeve while inspecting Meggie with its gleaming beady black eyes, and when it yawned it bared teeth as sharp as needles.

'This is Gwin,' said Dustfinger. 'You can tickle him behind the ears if you like. He's very sleepy at the moment, so he won't bite.'

'Does he usually?' asked Meggie.

'Yes,' said Mo, getting back behind the wheel. 'If I were you I'd keep my fingers away from that little brute.'

But Meggie couldn't keep her hands off any animal, however sharp its teeth. 'He's a marten or something like that, right?' she asked.

'Something of that nature.' Dustfinger put his hand in his trouser pocket and gave Gwin a piece of dry bread. Meggie stroked his little head as he chewed – and her fingertips found something hard under the silky fur: tiny horns growing beside his ears. Surprised, she took her hand away. 'Do martens have horns?'

Dustfinger winked at her and let Gwin climb back into the rucksack. 'This one does,' he said.

Bewildered, Meggie watched him do up the straps. She felt as if she were still touching Gwin's little horns. 'Mo, did you know that martens have horns?' she asked.

'Oh, Dustfinger stuck them on that sharp-toothed little devil of his. For his performances.'

'What kind of performances?' Meggie looked enquiringly, first at Mo, then at Dustfinger, but Mo just started the engine and Dustfinger, who seemed to have come far, judging by his bags, took off his boots and stretched out on Mo's bed in the van with a deep sigh. 'Don't give me away, Silvertongue,' he said before he closed his eyes. 'I have my own secrets, you know. And for those I need darkness.'

They must have driven fifty kilometres, and Meggie was still trying to work out what he could possibly have meant.

'Mo?' she asked, when Dustfinger began snoring behind them. 'What does this Capricorn want from you?' She lowered her voice before she spoke the name, as if that might remove some of the menace from it.

'A book,' replied Mo, without taking his eyes off the road.

'A book? Then why not give it to him?'

'I can't. I'll explain soon, but not now, all right?'

Meggie looked out of the van window. The world they were passing outside already looked unfamiliar – unfamiliar houses, unfamiliar roads, unfamiliar fields, even the trees and the sky looked unfamiliar – but Meggie was used to that. She had never really felt at home anywhere. Mo was her home, Mo and her books, and perhaps the camper van that carried them from one place to the next.

‘This aunt we’re going to see,’ she said, as they drove through an endless tunnel. ‘Does she have any children?’

‘No,’ said Mo, ‘and I’m afraid she doesn’t particularly like children either. But as I said, I’m sure you’ll get on well with her.’

Meggie sighed. She could remember several aunts, and she hadn’t ‘got on’ particularly well with any of them.

They were driving through mountains now, the slopes on both sides of the road rose ever more steeply, and there came a point where the houses looked not just unfamiliar but really different. Meggie tried to pass the time by counting tunnels, but when the ninth swallowed them up and the darkness went on and on she fell asleep. She dreamed of martens in black jackets and a book in a brown-paper cover.



4

A House Full of Books

There is a sort of busy worm,
That will the fairest book deform.
Their tasteless tooth will tear and taint
The poet, patriot, sage or saint,
Nor sparing wit nor learning.
Now, if you'd know the reason why,
The best of reasons I'll supply:
'Tis bread to the poor vermin.

J. Doraston, quoted by W. Blades

Meggie woke up because it was so quiet. The regular sound of the engine that had lulled her to sleep had stopped. The driver's seat beside her was empty. It took Meggie a little while to remember why she wasn't in bed at home. Tiny dead flies were stuck to the windscreen, and the van was parked outside an iron gate. It looked alarming, with sharp ashen-grey spikes, a gate made of spearheads just waiting to impale anyone who tried to clamber over. It reminded Meggie of one of her favourite stories, the tale of the Selfish Giant who wouldn't let children into his garden. This was exactly how she had imagined his garden gate.

Mo was standing in the road with Dustfinger. Meggie got out and went over to them. On the right of the road a densely wooded slope fell steeply to the bank of a wide lake. The hills on the other side rose from the lake like giants emerging from

the depths. The water was almost black, and pale twilight, darkly reflected in the waves, was already spreading across the sky. The first lights were coming on in the houses on the bank, looking like glow-worms or fallen stars.

‘A lovely place, isn’t it?’ Mo put his arm round Meggie’s shoulders. ‘I know you like stories about robbers. See that ruined castle? A notorious robber band once lived there. I must ask Elinor about them. She knows everything about this lake.’

Meggie just nodded and rested her head against his shoulder. She was so tired that she felt quite dizzy, but for the first time since they had set off Mo’s face wasn’t looking grim with anxiety. ‘Where does she live, then?’ asked Meggie, stifling a yawn. ‘Not behind that spiky gate?’

‘Actually, yes. This is the entrance to her property. Not very inviting, is it?’ Mo laughed and led Meggie across the road. ‘Elinor is very proud of this gate. She had it specially made. It’s copied from a picture in a book.’

‘A picture of the Selfish Giant’s garden?’ murmured Meggie, peering through the intricately twining iron bars.

‘*The Selfish Giant?*’ Mo laughed. ‘No, I think it was another story. Although that one would suit Elinor pretty well.’

Tall hedges grew on both sides of the gate, their thorny branches hiding any view of what lay beyond. But even through the iron bars Meggie could see nothing promising except for tall rhododendron bushes and a broad gravel drive that soon disappeared between them.

‘Looks like you have rich relations,’ Dustfinger whispered in her ear.

‘Yes, Elinor is quite rich,’ said Mo, drawing Meggie away from the gate. ‘But she’ll probably end up poor as a church mouse because she spends so much money on books. I think she’d sell her soul to the Devil without thinking twice if he offered her the right book for it.’ He pushed the heavy gate open with a single movement.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Meggie in alarm. ‘We can’t just drive in.’ For there was a notice beside the door, still clearly legible even if some of the letters were partly hidden by the leaves of the hedge:

PRIVATE PROPERTY.
NO UNAUTHORISED ENTRY.

Meggie didn’t think it sounded very inviting.

Mo, however, only laughed. ‘Don’t worry,’ he said, opening the gate wider. ‘The only thing Elinor guards with a burglar alarm is her library. She couldn’t care less who walks through this gate. She’s not what you’d call a nervous woman, and she doesn’t have many visitors anyway.’

‘What about dogs?’ Dustfinger peered anxiously into the strange garden. ‘That gate suggests at least three ferocious dogs to me. Big ones, the size of calves.’

But Mo just shook his head. ‘Elinor hates dogs,’ he said, going back to the van. ‘Right, get in.’

Elinor’s grounds were more like a wood than a garden. Once they were through the gateway the drive curved, as if taking a deep breath before going on up the slope, then lost itself among dark firs and chestnut trees which grew so close together that their branches made a tunnel. Meggie was just thinking it would never end when the trees suddenly receded, and the drive brought them to an open space covered with gravel and surrounded by carefully tended rose beds.

A grey estate car stood on the gravel in front of a house that was bigger than the school Meggie had been attending for the last year. She tried to count the windows, but soon gave up. It was a very beautiful house but looked just as uninviting as the iron gate. Perhaps it was only the evening twilight that made the ochre-yellow of the plaster look so dirty. And perhaps the green shutters were closed only because night was already falling over the surrounding mountains. Perhaps. But Meggie

would have bet her last book they were seldom open even in the daytime.

The dark wooden front door looked as forbidding as a tightly closed mouth, and Meggie involuntarily reached for Mo's hand as they approached it.

Dustfinger followed warily, with his battered rucksack over his shoulder. Gwin was probably still asleep inside it. When Mo and Meggie went up to the door he kept a couple of steps behind them, looking uneasily at the closed shutters as if he suspected that the mistress of the house was watching them from one of the windows.

There was a small barred window beside the front door, the only one not hidden behind green shutters. Below it was another notice:

IF YOU INTEND TO WASTE MY TIME
ON TRIVIA, YOU'D BETTER GO AWAY **NOW!**

Meggie cast Mo an anxious glance, but he only made an encouraging face at her and pressed the bell.

Meggie heard it ringing inside the big house, but nothing happened for quite a while. A magpie fluttered out of one of the rhododendron bushes growing near the house, and a couple of fat sparrows pecked busily at invisible insects in the gravel, but that was all. Meggie was just throwing them the breadcrumbs she had found in her jacket pocket – left over from a picnic on some long-forgotten day – when the door suddenly opened.

The woman who came out was older than Mo, quite a lot older – although Meggie could never be quite sure how old grown-ups were. Her face reminded Meggie of a bulldog, but perhaps that was more her ferocious expression than its features. She wore a mouse-grey sweater and an ash-grey skirt, with a pearl necklace round her short neck and felt slippers on her feet, the kind of slippers Meggie had once had to wear when she and Mo had visited an historic castle. Elinor's hair was grey too. She had pinned it up, but strands were hanging

down everywhere as if she had done it impatiently and in a hurry. She didn't look as if she spent much time in front of a mirror.

'Good heavens, Mortimer! What a surprise!' she said, without wasting time on further greetings. 'Where did you spring from?' Her voice sounded brusque, but her face couldn't entirely hide the fact that she was pleased to see Mo.

'Hello, Elinor,' said Mo, putting his hand on Meggie's shoulder. 'Do you remember Meggie? As you can see, she's grown up quite a bit now.'

Elinor cast Meggie a brief, irritated glance. 'Yes, so I see,' she said. 'It's only natural for children to grow, wouldn't you say? As far as I remember, it's been some years since I last set eyes on either you or your daughter, so to what do I owe the unexpected honour of your visit today? Are you finally going to take pity on my poor books?'

'That's right.' Mo nodded. 'One of my library commissions has been postponed – you know how libraries are always short of money.'

Meggie looked at him uneasily. She hadn't realised he could lie quite so convincingly.

'And because it was so sudden,' Mo continued, 'I couldn't find anywhere for Meggie to go, so I brought her with me. I know you don't like children, but Meggie won't leave jam on your books or tear out pages to wrap up dead frogs.'

Elinor muttered something suspicious, and scrutinised Meggie as if she thought her capable of any kind of disgraceful conduct, whatever her father might say. 'When you last brought her we could at least put her in a playpen,' she remarked coldly. 'I don't suppose that would do now.' Once again, she looked Meggie up and down as if she were being asked to admit a dangerous animal to her house.

Meggie felt her anger make the blood rise to her face. She wanted to go home, or get back in the camper van and go

somewhere else, anywhere, so long as she didn't have to stay with this horrible woman whose cold pebble eyes were boring holes in her face.

Elinor's gaze moved from Meggie to Dustfinger, who was still standing in the background looking awkward. 'And who's this?' She looked enquiringly at Mo. 'Do I know him?'

'This is Dustfinger, a ... a friend of mine.' Perhaps only Meggie noticed Mo's hesitation. 'He wants to go on south, but maybe you could put him up for a night in one of your many rooms?'

Elinor folded her arms. 'Only on condition his name has nothing to do with the way he treats books,' she said. 'And he'll have to put up with rather Spartan accommodation in the attic, because my library has grown a great deal over the last few years. Nearly all my guest bedrooms are full of books.'

'How many books do you have?' asked Meggie. She had grown up among piles of books, but even she couldn't imagine there were books behind *all* the windows of this huge house.

Elinor inspected her again, this time with unconcealed contempt. 'How many?' she repeated. 'Do you think I count them like buttons or peas? A very, very great many. There are probably more books in every single room of this house than you will ever read – and some of them are so valuable that I wouldn't hesitate to shoot you if you dared touch them. But as you're a clever girl, or so your father assures me, you wouldn't do that anyway, would you?'

Meggie didn't reply. Instead, she imagined standing on tiptoe and spitting three times into this old witch's face.

However, Mo just laughed. 'You haven't changed, Elinor,' he remarked. 'A tongue as sharp as a paper-knife. But I warn you, if you harm Meggie I'll do the same to your beloved books.'

Elinor's lips curled in a tiny smile. 'Well said,' she answered, stepping aside. 'You obviously haven't changed either. Come in.'

I'll show you the books that need your help, and a few others as well.'

Meggie had always thought Mo had a lot of books. She never thought so again, not after setting foot in Elinor's house.

There were no haphazard piles lying around as they did at home. Every book obviously had its place. But where other people have wallpaper, pictures, or just an empty wall, Elinor had bookshelves. The shelves were white and went right up to the ceiling in the entrance hall through which she had first led them, but in the next room and the corridor beyond it the shelves were as black as the tiles on the floor.

'These books,' announced Elinor with a dismissive gesture as they passed the closely-ranked spines, 'have accumulated over the years. They're not particularly valuable, mostly of mediocre quality, nothing out of the ordinary. Should certain fingers be unable to control themselves and take one off the shelf now and then,' she added, casting a brief glance at Meggie, 'I don't suppose the consequences would be too serious. Just so long as once those fingers have satisfied their curiosity they put every book back in its right place again and don't leave any unappetising bookmarks inside.' Here, Elinor turned to Mo. 'Believe it or not,' she said, 'I actually found a dried-up slice of salami used as a bookmark in one of the last books I bought, a wonderful nineteenth-century first edition.'

Meggie couldn't help giggling, which naturally earned her another stern look. 'It's nothing to laugh about, young lady,' said Elinor. 'Some of the most wonderful books ever printed were lost because some fool of a fishmonger tore out their pages to wrap his stinking fish. In the Middle Ages, thousands of books were destroyed when people cut up their bindings to make soles for shoes or to heat steam baths with their paper.' The thought of such incredible abominations, even if they had occurred centuries ago, made Elinor gasp for air. 'Well, let's

forget about that,' she said, 'or I shall get overexcited. My blood pressure's much too high as it is.'

She had stopped in front of a door which had an anchor with a dolphin coiled around it painted on the white wood. 'This is a famous printer's special sign,' explained Elinor, stroking the dolphin's pointed nose with one finger. 'Just the thing for a library door, eh?'

'I know,' said Meggie. 'Aldus Manutius. He lived in Venice and printed books the right size to fit into his customers' saddlebags.'

'Really?' Elinor wrinkled her brow, intrigued. 'I didn't know that. In any case, I am the fortunate owner of a book that he printed with his own hands in the year 1503.'

'You mean it's from his workshop,' Meggie corrected her.

'Of course that's what I mean.' Elinor cleared her throat and gave Mo a reproachful glance, as if it could only be his fault that his daughter was precocious enough to know such things. Then she put her hand on the door handle. 'No child,' she said, as she pressed the handle down with almost solemn reverence, 'has ever before passed through this door, but as I assume your father has taught you a certain respect for books I'll make an exception today. However, only on condition you keep at least three paces away from the shelves. Is that agreed?'

For a moment Meggie felt like saying no, it wasn't. She would have loved to surprise Elinor by showing contempt for her precious books, but she couldn't do it. Her curiosity was too much for her. She felt almost as if she could hear the books whispering on the other side of the half-open door. They were promising her a thousand unknown stories, a thousand doors into worlds she had never seen before. The temptation was stronger than Meggie's pride.

'Agreed,' she murmured, clasping her hands behind her back. 'Three paces.' Her fingers were itching with desire.

‘Sensible child,’ said Elinor, so condescendingly that Meggie almost went back on her decision. But then they entered Elinor’s holy of holies.

‘You’ve had the place renovated,’ Meggie heard Mo say. He added something else, but she wasn’t listening any more. She was just staring at the books. The shelves on which they stood smelled of freshly sawn wood. They went all the way up to a sky-blue ceiling with tiny lights in it, hanging there like stars. Narrow wooden stepladders on castors stood by the shelves, ready to help any reader up to the top shelves. There were reading desks with books lying open on them, held in place by brass chains that shone like gold. There were glass display cases containing books with pages stained by age but showing the most wonderful pictures. Meggie couldn’t resist moving closer. One step forward, a quick glance at Elinor, who luckily had her back turned, and she was right beside the display case. She bent lower and lower over the glass until her nose was touching it.

Prickly leaves twined around pale brown letters. A tiny red dragon’s head was spitting out flowers over the stained paper. Riders on white horses looked at Meggie as if scarcely a day had passed since someone painted them with tiny marten-hair brushes. A man and woman stood beside them, perhaps a bridal couple. A man with a bright red hat was looking angrily at them.

‘You call that three paces?’

Meggie spun round in alarm, but Elinor didn’t seem too angry. ‘Yes, the art of illumination,’ she said. ‘Once only rich people could read, so the pictures painted round the letters were to help the poor to understand the stories too. Of course no one planned to give them pleasure – the poor were put into the world to work, not to have a nice time or look at pretty pictures. That kind of thing was only for the rich. No, the idea was to instruct the poor. Usually the stories came from the Bible and everyone knew them anyway. The books were put in

churches, and a page was turned every day to show a new picture.'

'What about this book?' asked Meggie.

'I shouldn't think this one was ever in a church,' replied Elinor. 'More likely it was made for a very rich man to enjoy. It's almost six hundred years old.' There was no missing the pride in her voice. 'People have committed murder for such a book. Luckily, I only had to buy it.'

As she spoke these last words she turned abruptly and looked at Dustfinger, who had followed them into the library, soundless as a prowling cat. For a moment Meggie thought Elinor would send him back into the corridor, but Dustfinger stood in front of the shelves looking so impressed, with his hands behind his back, that he gave her no reason to turn him out, so she just cast him a final distrustful glance and turned back to Mo.

He was standing at one of the reading desks with a book in his hand. Its spine hung only by a couple of threads. He held it very carefully, like a bird with a broken wing.

'Well?' asked Elinor anxiously. 'Can you save it? I know it's in terrible shape, and I'm afraid the others aren't in a much better way, but ...'

'Oh, that can all be put right.' Mo put the book down and inspected another. 'But I think it will take me at least two weeks. If I don't have to get hold of more materials, which could mean I need more time. Will you put up with us that long?'

'Of course.' Elinor nodded, but Meggie noticed the glance she cast at Dustfinger. He was still standing beside the shelves near the door and seemed entirely absorbed in looking at the books, but Meggie sensed that he had missed none of what was said behind his back.

There were no books in Elinor's kitchen, not one, but they ate an excellent supper there at a wooden table that came, so Elinor assured them, from the scriptorium of an Italian monastery. Meggie doubted it. As far as she knew, the monks had worked at desks with sloping tops in the scriptoria of their monasteries, but she kept this information to herself. Instead, she took another slice of bread, and was just wondering how nice the cheese standing on the supposed scriptorium table would be when she noticed Mo whispering something to Elinor. Since Elinor's eyes widened greedily, Meggie concluded that they could only be discussing a book, and she immediately thought of brown paper, a pale green linen binding, and the anger in Mo's voice.

Beside her, Dustfinger surreptitiously slipped a slice of ham into his rucksack for Gwin's supper. Meggie saw a round nose emerge from the rucksack, snuffling in the hope of more delicacies. Dustfinger smiled at Meggie when he noticed her looking at him and gave Gwin some more ham. He didn't seem to find anything odd about Mo and Elinor's whispering, but Meggie was sure the two of them were planning something secret.

After a short time Mo rose from the table and went out. Meggie asked Elinor where the bathroom was – and followed him.

It was a strange feeling to be spying on Mo. She couldn't remember ever doing it before – except last night, when Dustfinger had arrived. And the time when she had tried to find out whether Mo was Father Christmas. She was ashamed of stealing after him like this, but it was his own fault. Why was he hiding the book from her? And now he might be going to give it to this Elinor – a book Meggie wasn't allowed to see! Ever since Mo had hurriedly hidden it behind his back, Meggie hadn't been able to get it out of her head. She had even looked for it in Mo's bag before he loaded his things into the van, but she couldn't find it.

She just had to see it before it disappeared, maybe into one of Elinor's display cases! She had to know why it meant so much to Mo that, for its sake, he would drag her all the way here.

He looked round once more in the entrance hall before leaving the house, but Meggie ducked down behind a chest just in time. The chest smelled of mothballs and lavender. She decided to stay in hiding there until Mo came back. He'd be sure to see her if she went out of doors. Time passed painfully slowly, as it always does when you're waiting for something with your heart thumping hard. The books in the white bookcases seemed to be watching Meggie, but they said nothing to her, as if they sensed that there was only one book Meggie could think about just now.

Finally, Mo came back carrying a package wrapped in brown paper. Perhaps he's just going to hide it here, thought Meggie. Where could you hide a book better than among ten thousand others? Yes, Mo was going to leave it here and then they'd drive home again. But I *would* like to see it, thought Meggie, just once, before it's put on one of those shelves I'm supposed to stay three paces away from.

Mo passed her so close that she could have touched him, but he didn't notice her. 'Meggie, don't look at me like that!' he sometimes told her. 'You're reading my thoughts again.'

Now he looked anxious – as if he wasn't quite sure he was doing the right thing. Meggie counted slowly to three before following her father, but a couple of times Mo stopped so suddenly that Meggie almost ran into him. He didn't return to the kitchen but went straight to the library. Without looking back once, he opened the door with the Venetian printer's mark on it, and closed it quietly behind him.

So, there stood Meggie among all the silent books, wondering whether to follow him and ask him to show her the book. Would he be very angry? She was just about to summon up all her courage and go after him when she heard footsteps – rapid,

firm footsteps, quick and impatient. That could only be Elinor. Now what?

Meggie opened the nearest door and slipped through it. A four-poster bed, a wardrobe, silver-framed photographs, a pile of books on the bedside table, a catalogue lying open on the rug, its pages full of pictures of old books. She was in Elinor's bedroom. Heart thudding, she listened for noises outside; she could hear Elinor's energetic footsteps and then the sound of the library door closing for the second time. Cautiously, she slipped out into the corridor again. She was still standing outside the library, undecided, when she felt a hand suddenly laid on her shoulder from behind. Another hand stifled her cry of alarm.

'It's only me!' breathed Dustfinger into her ear. 'Keep quiet or we're both in trouble, understand?'

Meggie nodded, and Dustfinger slowly took his hand away from her mouth. 'Your father's going to give the old witch that book, right?' he whispered. 'Has he taken it out of the van? Tell me. He did have it with him, didn't he?'

Meggie pushed him away. 'I don't know!' she snapped. 'Anyway, what business is it of yours?'

'What business is it of mine?' Dustfinger laughed quietly. 'Well, perhaps I'll tell you some time. But just now all I want to know is whether you've seen it.'

Meggie shook her head. She didn't know herself why she was lying to Dustfinger. Perhaps because he had pressed his hand over her mouth a little too hard.

'Meggie, listen to me!' Dustfinger looked at her intently. His scars were like pale lines that someone had drawn on his cheeks: two slightly curved marks on the left cheek, a third and longer line on the right cheek running from ear to nostril. 'Capricorn will kill your father if he doesn't get that book!' hissed Dustfinger. 'Kill him, do you understand? Didn't I tell you what he's like? He wants the book, and he *always* gets what

he wants. It's ridiculous to believe it will be safe from him here.'

'Mo doesn't think so!'

Dustfinger straightened up and stared at the library door. 'Yes, I know,' he murmured. 'That's the trouble. And so,' he said, putting both hands on Meggie's shoulders and propelling her towards the closed door, 'so now you're going to go in there, the picture of innocence, and find out what the pair of them are planning to do with that book. OK?'

Meggie was about to protest, but before she knew it Dustfinger had opened the door and pushed her into the library.



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5

Only a Picture

For him that stealeth, or borroweth and returneth not, this book from its owner, let it change into a serpent in his hand and rend him.

Let him be struck with palsy, and all his members blasted. Let him languish in pain, crying aloud for mercy, and let there be no surcease to this agony till he sing in dissolution. Let bookworms gnaw his entrails ... and when at last he goeth to his last punishment, let the flames of hell consume him for ever.

*Curse on book thieves,
from the monastery of San Pedro,
Barcelona, Spain*

They had unwrapped the book. Meggie saw the brown paper lying on a chair. Neither of them noticed that she had come in; Elinor was bending over one of the reading desks with Mo beside her. They both had their backs to the door.

‘Amazing. I thought there wasn’t a single copy left,’ Elinor was saying. ‘There are strange stories about this book going around. A second-hand dealer from whom I buy quite often told me that three copies were stolen from him a few years ago. All on the same day too. And I’ve heard much the same story from two other booksellers.’

‘Really? Yes, very strange,’ said Mo, but Meggie knew his voice well enough to know that he was only pretending to be surprised. ‘Well, anyway, even if this wasn’t a rare book it means a lot to me, and I’d like to be sure it’s in safe hands for a while. Just till I come back for it.’

‘All books are in safe hands with me,’ replied Elinor, sounding cross. ‘You know that. They’re my children, my inky children, and I look after them well. I keep the sunlight away from their pages, I dust them and protect them from hungry bookworms and grubby human fingers. This one shall have a place of honour, and no one will see it until you want it back. I don’t really welcome visitors to my library. They just leave fingerprints and stray hairs in my poor books. Anyway, as you know, I have a very expensive burglar alarm system.’

‘Yes, that’s extremely reassuring!’ Mo’s voice sounded relieved. ‘Thank you, Elinor! I really am most grateful. And if anyone comes knocking at your door in the near future asking about the book, please will you make out you’ve never heard of it, all right?’

‘Of course. I’d do anything for a good bookbinder, and anyway you’re my niece’s husband. I really do miss her sometimes, you know. I expect you feel the same. Your daughter seems to be getting on all right without her, though.’

‘She hardly remembers her mother,’ said Mo quietly.

‘Well, that’s a blessing, wouldn’t you say? Sometimes it’s a good thing we don’t remember things half as well as books do. But for them we probably wouldn’t know anything for very long. It would all be forgotten: the Trojan War, Columbus, Marco Polo, Shakespeare, all the amazing kings and gods of the past ...’ Elinor turned round – and froze.

‘Did I fail to hear you knock?’ she asked, staring so angrily that Meggie had to summon up all her courage not to turn round and slip quickly back out into the passage.

‘How long have you been there, Meggie?’ asked Mo.

Meggie stuck her chin out. '*She* can see it, but you hide it away from *me!*' she said. Attack, she knew, is the best form of defence. 'You never hid any book from me before! What's so special about this one? Will I go blind if I read it? Will it bite my fingers off? What terrible secrets are there in it that I mustn't know?'

'I have my reasons for not showing it to you,' replied Mo. He looked very pale. Without another word he went over and tried to lead her to the door, but Meggie tore herself away.

'Pig-headed, isn't she?' remarked Elinor. 'It almost makes me like her! Her mother was just the same, I remember. Come here.' She stepped aside and beckoned Meggie over. 'Look, you can see there's nothing very exciting about this book, at least not to you. But see for yourself. We're always most likely to believe the evidence of our own eyes. Or doesn't your father agree?' She cast Mo an enquiring glance.

Mo hesitated, then resigned himself and nodded.

The book was lying open on the reading desk. It didn't seem particularly old. Meggie knew what really old books looked like. She had seen books in Mo's workshop with their pages spotted like leopard-skin and almost as yellow. She remembered one with a binding that had been attacked by woodworm. The traces of their jaws had looked like tiny bullet holes, and Mo had got out his book block, carefully fixed the pages back together, and then, as he put it, gave them a new dress. Such a dress could be made of leather or linen, it might be plain, or Mo might imprint a pattern on it with his tiny decorative stamps.

This book was bound in linen, silvery green like willow leaves. The edges of the pages were slightly roughened, and the paper was still so pale that every letter stood out clear and black. A narrow red bookmark lay between the open pages. The right-hand page had an illustration on it, showing women in magnificent dresses, a fire-eater, acrobats, and a man who looked like a king. Meggie turned the pages. There weren't

many illustrations, but the first letter of each chapter was itself a little decorative picture. Animals sat on some of these initial letters, plants twined round others, one 'F' burned bright as fire. The flames looked so real that Meggie touched them with one finger to make sure they weren't hot. The next chapter began with an 'N'. An animal with a furry tail sat perched in the angle between the second and third strokes of the letter. *No one saw him slip out of town*, read Meggie, but before she could get any further with the story Elinor closed the book in her face.

'I think that'll do,' she said, tucking it under her arm. 'Your father's asked me to put this book somewhere safe for him, and so I will.'

Mo took Meggie's hand again, and this time she followed him. 'Please forget that book, Meggie!' he whispered. 'It's an unlucky story. I'll get you a hundred others.'

Meggie just nodded. Before Mo closed the door behind them, she caught a last glance of Elinor standing there looking at the book lovingly, the way Mo sometimes looked at her when he put her to bed in the evening.

Then the door was closed.

'Where will she put it?' asked Meggie as she followed Mo down the corridor.

'Oh, she has some very good hiding-places for such things,' replied Mo evasively. 'But they're secret, as hiding-places ought to be. Suppose I show you your room now?' He was trying to sound carefree, and not succeeding particularly well. 'It's like a room in an expensive hotel. No, much better.'

'Sounds good,' murmured Meggie, looking round, but there was no sign of Dustfinger. Where had he gone? She had to ask him something. At once. That was all she could think of while Mo was showing her the room and telling her that everything was all right now; he just had to do his bookbinding work, then they'd go home. Meggie nodded and pretended to be listening, but her mind was full of the question she wanted to ask

Dustfinger. It burned on her lips so fiercely that she was surprised Mo didn't see it there.

When Mo left her to go and fetch their bags from the camper van Meggie went into the kitchen, but Dustfinger wasn't there either. She even looked for him in Elinor's bedroom, but however many doors in the huge house she opened there was no sign of him. Finally, she was too tired to go on searching. Mo had gone to bed long ago, and Elinor had disappeared into her own bedroom. So Meggie went to her room and lay down in the big bed. She felt very lost in it, like a dwarf, as if she had shrunk. Like *Alice in Wonderland*, she thought, patting the flowered bed linen. Otherwise she liked the room. It was full of books and pictures, and there was even a fireplace, although it looked as if no one had used it for at least a hundred years. Meggie swung her legs out of bed again and went over to the window. Outside, night had fallen long ago, and when she pushed the window shutters open a cool breeze blew on her face. The only thing she could make out in the dark was the gravel forecourt in front of the house. A lamp cast pale light over the grey and white pebbles. Mo's stripey van stood beside Elinor's grey estate car like a zebra lost in a horse's stable. Meggie thought of the house they had left in such a hurry, and her room there, and school, where her desk would have been empty today. She wasn't sure whether she felt homesick or not.

She left the shutters open when she went back to bed. Mo had put her book-box beside her. Wearily, she took a book out and tried to make herself a nice nest in its familiar words, but it was no good. Again and again the thought of that other book blurred the words, again and again Meggie saw the big initial letters before her – large, colourful letters surrounded by figures whose story she didn't know because the book hadn't had time to tell it to her.

I must find Dustfinger, she thought sleepily. He must be here somewhere. But then the book slipped from her fingers and she

fell asleep.

The sun woke her next morning. The air was still cool from the night before, but the sky was cloudless, and when Meggie leaned out of the window she could see the lake gleaming in the distance beyond the branches of the trees. The room Elinor had given her was on the first floor. Mo was sleeping only two doors further along, but Dustfinger had to make do with an attic room. Meggie had seen it when she was looking for him yesterday. It held nothing but a narrow bed surrounded by crates of books towering up to the rafters.

Mo was already sitting at the table with Elinor when Meggie came down to the kitchen for breakfast, but Dustfinger wasn't there. 'Oh, he's had breakfast already,' said Elinor sharply, when Meggie asked about him. 'Along with some animal like a Pomeranian dog. It was sitting on the table and it spat at me when I came into the kitchen. I wasn't expecting anything like that. I made it clear to your peculiar friend that flies are the only animals I'll allow anywhere near my kitchen table, and so he took the furry creature outside.'

'What do you want him for?' asked Mo.

'Oh, nothing special. I – I just wanted to ask him something,' said Meggie. She hastily ate half a slice of bread, drank some of the horribly bitter cocoa Elinor had made, and went out.

She found Dustfinger behind the house, standing on a lawn of short, rather rough grass where a solitary deckchair stood next to a plaster angel. There was no sign of Gwin. A few birds were quarrelling among the red flowers of the rhododendron, and there stood Dustfinger looking lost to the world, and juggling. Meggie tried to count the coloured balls – four, six, eight. He plucked them out of the air so swiftly that it made her dizzy to watch him. He stood on one leg to catch them, casually, as if he didn't even have to look. Only when he spotted Meggie did a ball escape his fingers and roll at her feet. Meggie picked it up and threw it back.

‘Where did you learn to do that?’ she asked. ‘It looked – well, wonderful.’

Dustfinger made her a mocking bow. There was that strange smile of his again. ‘It’s how I earn my living,’ he said. ‘With the juggling and a few other things.’

‘How can you earn a living that way?’

‘At markets and fairs. At children’s birthday parties. Did you ever go to one of those fairs where people pretend they’re still living in Medieval times?’

Meggie nodded. Yes, she had once been to a fair like that with Mo. There had been wonderful things there, so strange that they might have come from another world, not just another time. Mo had bought her a box decorated with brightly coloured stones, and a little fish made of shiny green and gold metal, with its mouth wide open and a jingle in its hollow body that rang like a little bell when you shook it. The air had smelled of freshly baked bread, smoke and damp clothes, and Meggie had watched a smith making a sword, and had hidden behind Mo’s back from a woman in witch’s costume.

Dustfinger picked up his juggling balls and put them back in his bag which was standing open on the grass behind him. Meggie went over to it and looked inside. She saw some bottles, some white cotton wool and a carton of milk, but before she could see any more Dustfinger closed the bag.

‘Sorry, trade secrets,’ he said. ‘Your father’s given the book to this Elinor, hasn’t he?’

Meggie shrugged her shoulders.

‘It’s all right, you can tell me. I know anyway. I was listening. He’s mad to leave it here, but what can I do?’ Dustfinger sat down on the deckchair. His rucksack was on the grass next to him, with a bushy tail spilling out of it.

‘I saw Gwin,’ said Meggie.

‘Did you?’ Dustfinger leaned back, closing his eyes. His hair looked even paler in the sunlight. ‘So did I. He’s in the rucksack. It’s the time of day when he sleeps.’

‘I mean I saw him in the book.’ Meggie didn’t take her eyes off Dustfinger’s face as she said this, but it didn’t move a muscle. His thoughts couldn’t be read on his brow, in the same way as she could read Mo’s. Dustfinger’s face was a closed book, and Meggie had the feeling that if anyone tried reading it he would rap their knuckles. ‘He was sitting on a letter,’ she went on. ‘On a capital N. I saw his horns.’

‘Really?’ Dustfinger didn’t even open his eyes. ‘And do you know which of her thousands of shelves that book-mad woman put it on?’

Meggie ignored his question. ‘Why does Gwin look like the animal in the book?’ she asked. ‘Did you really stick those horns on him?’

Dustfinger opened his eyes and blinked up at the sun.

‘Hm, did I?’ he enquired, looking at the sky. A few clouds were drifting over Elinor’s house. The sun disappeared behind one of them, and its shadow fell across the green grass like an ugly mark.

‘Does your father often read aloud to you, Meggie?’ asked Dustfinger.

Meggie looked at him suspiciously. Then she knelt down beside the rucksack and stroked Gwin’s silky tail. ‘No,’ she said. ‘But he taught me to read when I was five.’

‘Ask him *why* he doesn’t read aloud to you,’ said Dustfinger. ‘And don’t let him put you off with excuses.’

‘What do you mean?’ Meggie straightened up, feeling cross. ‘He doesn’t like reading aloud, that’s all.’

Dustfinger smiled. Leaning out of the deckchair, he put one hand into the rucksack. ‘Ah, that feels like a nice full stomach,’ he commented. ‘I think Gwin had good hunting last night. I

hope he's not been plundering a nest again. Perhaps it's just Elinor's rolls and eggs.' Gwin's tail twitched back and forth almost like a cat's.

Meggie looked at the rucksack with distaste. She was glad she couldn't see Gwin's muzzle. There might still be blood on it.

Dustfinger leaned back in Elinor's deckchair. 'Shall I give you a performance this evening – show you what the bottles, the cotton wool and all the other mysterious things in my bag are for?' he asked without looking at her. 'It has to be dark for that, pitch dark. Are you scared to be out of doors in the middle of the night?'

'Of course not!' said Meggie, offended, although really she was not at all happy to be out in the dark. 'But first, tell me why you stuck those horns on Gwin! And tell me what you know about the book.'

Dustfinger folded his arms behind his head. 'Oh, I know a lot about that book,' he said. 'And perhaps I'll tell you some time, but first the two of us have a date. Here at eleven o'clock tonight. OK?'

Meggie looked up at a blackbird singing its heart out on Elinor's rooftop. 'OK,' she said. 'Eleven o'clock tonight.' Then she went back to the house.

Elinor had suggested that Mo set up his workshop next door to the library. There was a little room where she kept her collection of old books about animals and plants (for there seemed to be no kind of book that Elinor didn't collect). She kept this collection on shelves of pale, honey-coloured wood. On some of the shelves the books were propping up glass display cases of beetles pinned to cardboard, which only made Meggie dislike Elinor all the more. By the only window was a handsome table with turned legs, but it was barely half as long as the one Mo had in his workshop at home. Perhaps that was

why he was swearing quietly to himself when Meggie put her head round the door.

‘Look at this table!’ he said. ‘You could sort a stamp collection on it but not bind books. This whole room is too small. Where am I going to put the press and my tools? Last time I worked up in the attics, but now they’re filled with crates of books too.’

Meggie stroked the spines of the books crammed close together on the shelves. ‘Just tell her you need a bigger table.’ Carefully, she took a book off the shelf. It contained pictures of the strangest of insects: beetles with horns, beetles with probosces, one even had a proper nose. Meggie passed her forefinger over the pastel-coloured pictures. ‘Mo, why haven’t you ever read aloud to me?’

Her father turned round so abruptly that the book almost fell from her hand. ‘Why do you ask me that? You’ve been talking to Dustfinger, haven’t you? What did he tell you?’

‘Nothing. Nothing at all.’ Meggie herself didn’t know why she was lying. She put the beetle book back in its place. It felt almost as if someone were spinning a very fine web around the two of them, a web of secrets and lies closing in on them all the time. ‘I think it’s a good question, though,’ she said as she took out another book. It was called *Masters of Disguise*. The creatures in it looked like live twigs or dry leaves.

Mo turned his back to her again. He began laying out his implements on the table, even though it was too small: his folding tool on the left, then the round-headed hammer he used to tap the spines of books into shape, the sharp paper-knife ... He usually whistled under his breath as he worked, but now he was perfectly quiet. Meggie sensed that his thoughts were far away. But where?

Finally, he sat on the side of the table and looked at her. ‘I just don’t like reading aloud,’ he said, as if it was the most

uninteresting subject in the world. 'You know I don't. That's all.'

'But why not? I mean, you make up stories. You tell wonderful stories. You can do all the voices, and make it exciting and then funny ...'

Mo crossed his arms over his chest as if hiding behind them.

'You could read me *Tom Sawyer*,' suggested Meggie 'or *How the Rhinoceros Got His Skin*.' That was one of Mo's favourite stories. When she was smaller they sometimes played at having crumbs in their clothes, like the crumbs in the rhino's skin.

'Yes, an excellent story,' murmured Mo, turning his back to her again. He picked up the folder in which he kept his endpapers and leafed absent-mindedly through them. 'Every book should begin with attractive endpapers,' he had once told Meggie. 'Preferably in a dark colour: dark red or dark blue, depending on the binding. When you open the book it's like going to the theatre. First you see the curtain. Then it's pulled aside and the show begins.'

'Meggie, I really do have to work now,' he said without turning round. 'The sooner I'm through with Elinor's books the sooner we can go home again.'

Meggie put the book about creatures who were masters of disguise back in its place. 'Suppose he didn't stick the horns on?' she asked.

'What?'

'Gwin's horns. Suppose Dustfinger didn't stick them on?' 'Well, he did.' Mo drew a chair up to the table that was not long enough for him. 'By the way, Elinor's gone shopping. If you feel faint with hunger before she gets back, just make yourself a couple of pancakes, OK?'

'OK,' murmured Meggie. For a moment she wondered whether to tell him about her date with Dustfinger that night,

but then she decided against it. 'Do you think I can take some of these books to my room?' she asked instead.

'I'm sure you can. So long as they don't disappear into your box.'

'Like that book thief you once told me about?' Meggie put three books under her left arm and four under her right arm. 'How many was it he stole? Thirty thousand?'

'Forty thousand,' said Mo. 'But at least he didn't kill the owners.'

'No, that was the Spanish monk whose name I've forgotten.' Meggie went over to the door and opened it with her toe. 'Dustfinger says Capricorn would kill you to get hold of that book.' She tried to make her voice sound casual. 'Would he, Mo?'

'Meggie!' Mo turned round with the paper-knife, pretending to point it at her threateningly. 'Go and lie in the sun or bury your pretty nose in those books, but please let me get some work done. And tell Dustfinger I shall carve him into very thin slices with this knife if he goes on telling you such nonsense.'

'That wasn't a proper answer!' said Meggie, making her way out into the passage with an armful of books.

Once in her room, she spread the books out on the huge bed and began to read. She read about beetles who moved into empty snail-shells as we might move into an empty house, about frogs shaped like leaves and caterpillars with brightly coloured spines on their backs, white-bearded monkeys, stripy anteaters, and cats that dig in the ground for sweet potatoes. There seemed to be everything here, every creature Meggie could imagine, and even more that she could never have dreamed existed at all. But none of Elinor's clever books said a word about martens with horns.



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6

Fire and Stars

So along they came with dancing bears, dogs and goats, monkeys and marmots, walking the tightrope, turning somersaults both backwards and forwards, throwing daggers and knives and suffering no injury when they fell on their points and blades, swallowing fire and chewing stones, doing tricks with magic goblets and chains under cover of cloak and hat, making puppets fence with each other, trilling like nightingales, screaming like peacocks, calling like deer, wrestling and dancing to the sound of the double flute ...

Herzt,
Book of Minstrelsy

The day passed slowly. Meggie saw Mo only in the afternoon, when Elinor came back from doing her shopping and half an hour later gave them spaghetti with some kind of ready-made sauce. 'I'm afraid I've no patience with toiling over a stove,' she said as she put the dishes on the table. 'Perhaps our friend with the furry animal can cook?'

Dustfinger merely shrugged his shoulders apologetically. 'Sorry, I'm no use to you that way.'

'Mo cooks very well,' said Meggie, stirring the thin, watery sauce into her spaghetti.

‘Mo’s here to restore my books, not to cook for us,’ replied Elinor sharply. ‘What about you, though?’

Meggie shrugged. ‘I can make pancakes,’ she said. ‘Why don’t you get some cookery books? You have books of every other kind. I’m sure you’d find cookery books a help.’

Elinor didn’t even deign to reply to this suggestion.

‘And by the way, there’s a rule for night-time,’ she said, when they had all been eating in silence for a while. ‘I won’t have candlelight in my house. Fire makes me nervous. It’s far too greedy for paper.’

Meggie gulped. She felt caught in the act, for of course she had brought candles with her. They were on her bedside table upstairs, where Elinor must have seen them. However, Elinor was looking not at Meggie but at Dustfinger, who was playing with a box of matches.

‘I hope you’ll take that rule to heart,’ she said to him. ‘Since we’re obviously going to have the pleasure of your company for another night.’

‘Yes, if I may impose on your hospitality a little longer. I’ll be off first thing in the morning, I promise.’ Dustfinger was still holding the matches. He didn’t seem bothered by Elinor’s distrustful gaze. ‘I’d say someone here has the wrong idea about fire,’ he added. ‘It bites like a fierce little animal, admittedly, but you can tame it.’ And with these words he took a match out of the box, struck it, and popped the flame into his open mouth.

Meggie held her breath as his lips closed around the burning matchstick. Dustfinger opened his mouth again, took out the spent match, smiled and left it on his empty plate.

‘You see, Elinor?’ he said. ‘It didn’t bite me. It’s easier to tame than a kitten and almost as easy as a dog.’

Elinor just wrinkled her nose, but Meggie was so amazed that she could hardly take her eyes off Dustfinger’s scarred face. She looked at Mo. The little trick with the burning match didn’t

seem to have surprised him. He shot a warning glance at Dustfinger, who meekly put the box of matches away in his trouser pocket.

‘But of course I’ll keep the no-candles rule,’ he was quick to say. ‘That’s no problem. Really.’

Elinor nodded. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘And one more thing: if you go out again as soon as it’s dark this evening, the way you did last night, you’d better not be back too late, because I switch the burglar alarm on at nine-thirty on the dot.’

‘Ah, then I was in luck yesterday evening.’ Dustfinger slipped some spaghetti into his bag. Elinor didn’t notice, but Meggie did. ‘Yes, I do enjoy walking at night. The world’s more to my liking then, not so loud, not so fast, not so crowded and a good deal more mysterious. But I wasn’t planning to walk this evening. I have other plans for tonight, and I’ll have to ask you to switch this wonderful system of yours on a bit later than usual.’

‘Oh, indeed. And why, may I ask?’

Dustfinger winked at Meggie. ‘Well, I’ve promised to put on a little show for this young lady,’ he said. ‘It begins about an hour before midnight.’

‘Oh yes?’ Elinor dabbed some sauce off her lips with her napkin. ‘A little show. Why not in daylight? After all, the young lady’s only twelve years old. She should be in bed at eight o’clock.’

Meggie tightened her lips. She hadn’t been to bed as early as eight since her fifth birthday, but she wasn’t going to the trouble of explaining that to Elinor. Instead, she admired the casual way Dustfinger reacted to Elinor’s hostile gaze.

‘Ah, but you see the tricks I want to show Meggie wouldn’t look so good by day,’ he said, leaning back in his chair. ‘I’m afraid I need the black cloak of night. Why don’t you come and watch too? Then you’ll understand why it all has to be done in the dark.’

‘Go on, accept his offer, Elinor!’ said Mo. ‘You’ll enjoy the show. And then perhaps you won’t think fire’s so sinister.’

‘It’s not that I think it’s sinister. I don’t like it, that’s all,’ remarked Elinor, unmoved.

‘He can juggle!’ Meggie burst out. ‘With eight balls.’

‘Eleven,’ Dustfinger corrected her. ‘But juggling is more of a daylight skill.’

Elinor retrieved a string of spaghetti from the tablecloth and glanced first at Meggie and then at Mo. She looked cross. ‘Oh, very well. I don’t want to be a spoilsport,’ she said. ‘I shall go to bed with a book at nine-thirty as usual and put the alarm on first, but when Meggie tells me she’s going out for this private performance I’ll switch it off again for an hour. Will that be time enough?’

‘Ample time,’ said Dustfinger, bowing so low to her that the tip of his nose collided with the rim of his plate.

Meggie bit back her laughter.

It was five to eleven when she knocked at Elinor’s bedroom door.

‘Come in!’ she heard Elinor call, and when she put her head round the door she saw her aunt sitting up in bed, poring over a catalogue as thick as a telephone directory. ‘Oh, too expensive, too expensive!’ she murmured. ‘Take my advice, Meggie: never develop a passion you can’t afford. It’ll eat your heart away like a bookworm. Take this book here, for instance.’ Elinor tapped her finger on the left-hand page of her catalogue so hard that it wouldn’t have surprised Meggie if she had bored a hole in it. ‘What a fine edition – and in such good condition too! I’ve been wanting it for fifteen years, but it just costs too much money. Far too much.’

Sighing, she closed her catalogue, dropped it on the rug and swung her legs out of bed. To Meggie’s surprise, she was

wearing a long, flowered nightdress. She looked younger in it, almost like a girl who has woken up one morning to find her face wrinkled. 'Ah, well, you'll probably never be as crazy as I am!' she muttered, putting a thick pair of socks on her bare feet. 'Your father's not inclined to be crazy, and your mother never was either. Quite the opposite – I never knew anyone with a cooler head. My father, on the other hand, was at least as mad as me. I inherited over half my books from him, and what good did they do him? Did they keep him alive? Far from it. He died of a stroke at a book auction. Isn't that ridiculous?'

With the best will in the world, Meggie didn't know what to say to that. 'My mother?' she asked, instead. 'Did you know her well?'

Elinor snorted as if she had asked a silly question. 'Of course I did. It was here that your father met her. Didn't he ever tell you?'

Meggie shook her head. 'He doesn't talk about her much.' 'Well, probably better not. Why probe old wounds? And you're not particularly like her. She painted that sign on the library door. Come on, then, or you'll miss this show of yours.'

Meggie followed Elinor down the unlit corridor. For a moment she had the odd feeling that her mother might step out of one of the many doors, smiling at her. There was hardly a light on in the whole vast house, and once or twice Meggie bumped her knee on a chair or a little table that she hadn't seen in the gloom. 'Why is it so dark everywhere here?' she asked as Elinor felt around for the light switch in the entrance hall.

'Because I'd rather spend my money on books than unnecessary electricity,' replied Elinor, looking at the light she had turned on as if she thought the stupid thing should go easy on the power. Then she made her way over to a metal box fixed to the wall near the front door and hidden behind a thick, dusty curtain. 'I hope you switched your light off before you knocked on my door?' she asked, as she opened the box.

‘Of course,’ said Meggie, although it wasn’t true.

‘Turn round!’ Elinor told her before setting to work on the alarm system. She frowned. ‘Heavens, all these knobs! I hope I haven’t done something wrong again. Tell me as soon as the show’s over – and don’t even think of seizing your chance to slink into the library and take a book off the shelves. Remember that I sleep right next door, and my hearing is keener than a bat’s.’

Meggie bit back the answer on the tip of her tongue. Elinor opened the front door. Without a word, Meggie pushed past her and went outside. It was a mild night, full of strange scents and the chirping of crickets. ‘Were you always as nice as this to my mother?’ she asked as Elinor was about to close the door behind her.

Elinor looked at her for a moment as if turned to stone. ‘Oh yes, I think so,’ she said. ‘Yes, I’m sure I was. And she was always as cheeky as you, too! Have fun with your fire-eater!’ Then she shut the door.

As Meggie was going through the dark garden behind the house she suddenly heard unexpected music. It filled the night air as if it had been only waiting for Meggie’s footsteps: strange music, a carnival mixture of bells, pipes and drums, both boisterous and sad. Meggie wouldn’t have been surprised to find a whole troop of fairground entertainers waiting for her on the lawn behind Elinor’s house, but only Dustfinger stood there.

He was waiting where Meggie had found him that afternoon. The music came from a cassette recorder on the grass beside the wooden deckchair. Dustfinger had placed a garden bench on the edge of the lawn for his audience. Lighted torches were stuck into the ground to the right and left of it, and two more were burning on the lawn, casting quivering shadows in the night. The shadows danced across the grass like servants conjured up by Dustfinger from some dark world for this occasion. He himself stood there bare-chested, his skin as pale

as the moon, which was hanging in the sky right above Elinor's house as if it too had turned up especially for Dustfinger's show.

When Meggie emerged from the darkness Dustfinger bowed to her. 'Sit down, pretty lady!' he called over the music. 'We were all just waiting for you.'

Shyly, Meggie sat down on the bench and looked around her. The two dark glass bottles she had seen in Dustfinger's bag were standing on the deckchair. Something whitish shimmered in the bottle on the left, as if Dustfinger had filled it with moonlight. A dozen torches with white wadding heads were wedged between the wooden rungs of the chair, and beside the cassette recorder stood a bucket and a large, big-bellied vase, which if Meggie remembered correctly came from Elinor's entrance hall.

For a moment, she let her eyes wander to the windows of the house. There was no light in Mo's bedroom – he was probably still working – but one floor below Meggie saw Elinor standing at her lighted window. The moment Meggie looked her way she drew the curtain, as if she had felt Meggie watching her, but she still stayed at the window. Her shadow was a dark outline against the pale yellow curtain.

'Do you hear how quiet it is?' Dustfinger switched the recorder off. The silence of the night fell on Meggie's ears, muffled as if by cotton wool. Not a leaf moved; there was nothing to be heard but the torches crackling and the chirping of the crickets.

Dustfinger switched the music back on. 'I had a private word with the wind,' he said. 'There's one thing you should know: if the wind takes it into its head to play with fire then even I can't tame the blaze. But it gave me its word of honour to keep still tonight and not spoil our fun.'

So saying, he picked up one of the torches from Elinor's deckchair. He sipped from the bottle with the moonlight in it and spat something whitish out into the big vase. Then he

dipped the torch he was holding into the bucket, took it out again, and held its dripping head of wadding to one of its burning sisters. The fire flared up so suddenly it made Meggie jump. However, Dustfinger put the second bottle to his lips, filling his mouth until his scarred cheeks were bulging. Then he took a deep, deep breath, arched his body like a bow, and spat whatever was in his mouth out into the air above the burning torch.

A fireball hung over Elinor's lawn, a bright, blazing globe of fire. It ate away at the darkness like a living thing. And it was so big, Meggie felt sure everything around it would go up in flames: the grass, the deckchair, and Dustfinger himself. But he just spun round and round on the spot, exuberant as a dancing child, breathing out more fire. He made the fire climb high in the air, as if to set the stars alight. Then he lit a second torch and ran its flame over his bare arms. He looked as happy as a child playing with a pet animal. The fire licked his skin like something living, a darting, burning creature that he had befriended, a creature that caressed him and danced for him and drove the night away. He threw the torch high in the air where the fireball had just been blazing, caught it as it came down, lit more, juggled with three, four, five torches. Their fire whirled around him, danced with him but never hurt him: Dustfinger the tamer of flames, the man who breathed sparks, the friend of fire. He made the torches disappear as if the darkness had devoured them, bowed to the speechless Meggie with a smile, before once more spitting fire out into the night's black face.

Afterwards, she could never say what had distracted her attention from the whirling torches and the showers of sparks, making her look up once more at the house and its windows. Perhaps you feel the presence of evil on your skin like sudden heat or cold ... or perhaps it was just that the light now seeping through the library shutters caught her eye, the light falling on

the rhododendron bushes where their leaves pressed close to the wood. Perhaps.

She thought she heard voices rising above Dustfinger's music, men's voices, and a terrible fear rose inside her, as dark and strange as the terror she had felt on the night when she first saw Dustfinger standing out in the yard. As she jumped up, a burning torch slipped from his hands and fell on the grass. He quickly trod the fire out before it could spread any further, then followed the direction of Meggie's eyes, and he too looked at the house without a word.

Meggie began to run. Gravel crunched under her feet as she raced towards the house. The front door stood ajar, there was no light in the entrance hall, but Meggie heard loud voices echoing down the corridor that led to the library. 'Mo?' she called, and there was the fear back again, digging its curved beak into her heart, taking her breath away.

The library door was open too. Meggie was about to rush in when two strong hands grasped her by the shoulders.

'Quiet!' breathed Elinor, pulling her into her bedroom. Meggie saw that her fingers were shaking as she locked the door.

'Don't!' Meggie dragged Elinor's hand away, and tried to turn the key. She wanted to shout that she must help her father, but Elinor put a hand over her mouth and pulled her away from the door, hard as Meggie struggled, hitting and kicking. Elinor was strong, much stronger than Meggie.

'There are too many of them!' Elinor whispered as Meggie tried to bite her fingers. 'About four or five, big strong men, and they're armed.' She hauled the struggling Meggie over to the wall by the bed. 'I've told myself a hundred times – oh, a thousand times! – I ought to buy a revolver!' she muttered, pressing her ear to the wall.

'Of course it's here!' The voice carried through the wall without Meggie's having to strain to hear it, rasping like a cat's

tongue. 'Shall we fetch your little daughter from the garden to show us just where? Or would you rather find it for us yourself?'

Meggie tried to pull Elinor's hand away from her mouth. 'Stop it, for goodness' sake!' Elinor hissed in her ear. 'You'll only put him in more danger, do you understand?'

'My daughter! What do you know about my daughter?' That was Mo's voice.

Meggie sobbed aloud, and Elinor's fingers were instantly back over her face. 'I tried to call the police,' she whispered in Meggie's ear. 'But the lines are all down.'

'Oh, we know all we need to know.' The other voice again. 'So where's the book?'

'I'll give it to you!' Mo's voice sounded weary. 'But I'm going with you, because I want that book back as soon as Capricorn has finished with it.'

Going with them? What did he mean? He couldn't leave just like that! Meggie tried making for the door again, but Elinor held her fast. Meggie did her best to push her away, but Elinor simply wrapped her strong arms around her and pressed her fingers to Meggie's lips once more.

'All the better. We were told to bring you anyway,' said a second voice. It had a broad, coarse accent. 'You've no idea how Capricorn longs to hear your voice. He's got great faith in your abilities, Capricorn has.'

'That's right – the replacement Capricorn found for you makes a terrible hash of it.' The rasping voice again. 'Look at Cockerell there.' Meggie heard feet scraping on the floor. 'He's limping, and Flatnose's face has seen better days. Not that he was ever much of a beauty.'

'Don't just stand there talking, Basta, we haven't got for ever. How about it – do we take the kid as well?' Another voice. That one sounded as if the speaker's nose were being pinched.

‘No!’ Mo snapped at him. ‘My daughter stays here or I won’t give you the book!’

One of the men laughed. ‘Oh yes, Silvertongue, you’d give it to us all right, but don’t worry. We weren’t told to bring her. A child would just slow us down, and Capricorn’s been waiting for you long enough already. So where’s that book?’

Meggie pressed her ear against the wall so hard that it hurt. She heard footsteps, and then a sound like something being pushed aside. Elinor, beside her, held her breath.

‘Not a bad hiding-place!’ said the cat-like voice. ‘Wrap it up, Cockerell, and take good care of it. After you, Silvertongue. Let’s go.’

They left the library. Meggie tried desperately to wriggle out of Elinor’s arms. She heard the sound of the library door closing, and then steps moving away, getting fainter and fainter. After that, all was still. Quite suddenly, Elinor let go of her. Meggie rushed to the door, unlocked it, sobbing, and ran down the corridor to the library. It was deserted. No Mo. The books stood ranged tidily on their shelves, except in one place where there was a wide, dark gap. Meggie thought she saw a hinged flap, well hidden, standing open among the books.

‘Incredible!’ she heard Elinor saying behind her. ‘They really were after just that one book.’ But Meggie pushed her aside and ran along the corridor.

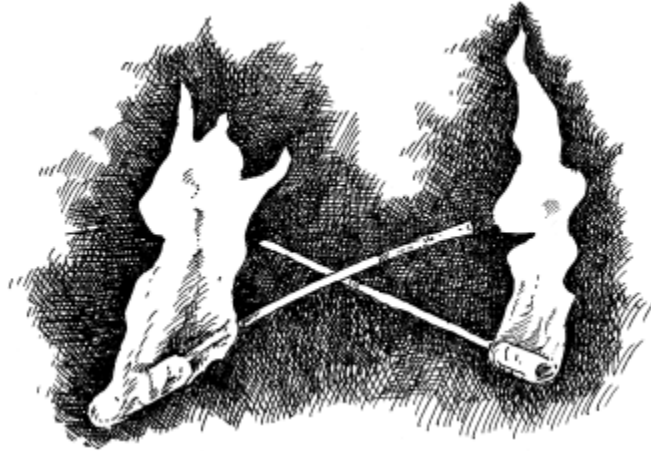
‘Meggie!’ Elinor called after her. ‘Wait!’

But what was there to wait for? For the strangers to take her father away? She heard Elinor running after her. Elinor’s arms might be stronger, but Meggie’s legs were faster.

There was still no light in the entrance hall. The front door stood wide open, and a cold wind blew in Meggie’s face as she stumbled breathlessly out into the night.

‘Mo!’ she shouted.

She thought she saw car headlights come on where the drive disappeared into the trees, and an engine started. Meggie ran that way. She tripped and fell, grazing her knee on the gravel, which was wet with dew. Warm blood trickled down her leg, but she took no notice. She ran on and on, limping and sobbing, until she had reached the big wrought iron gate. The road beyond it was empty. Mo was gone.



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7

What the Night Hides

**A thousand enemies outside the house
are better than one within.**

Arab proverb

Dustfinger was hiding behind a chestnut tree when Meggie ran past him. He saw her stop at the gate and look down the road. He heard her calling her father's name in a desperate voice. Her cries, as faint as the chirping of a cricket in the vast black night, were lost in the darkness. And when she gave up it was suddenly very quiet, and Dustfinger saw Meggie's slim figure standing there as if she would never move again. All her strength seemed to have forsaken her, as if the next gust of wind might blow her away.

She stood there so long that Dustfinger eventually closed his eyes so as not to have to look at her, but then he heard her weeping and his face turned hot with shame. He stood there without a sound, his back to the tree trunk, waiting for Meggie to go back to the house. But still she didn't move. At last, when his legs were quite numb, she turned like a marionette with some of its strings cut and went back towards the house. She was no longer crying as she passed Dustfinger, but she was wiping the tears from her eyes, and for a terrible moment he felt an urge to go to her, comfort her, and explain why he had told Capricorn everything. But Meggie had already passed him, and had quickened her pace as if her strength were returning.

Faster and faster she walked, until she had disappeared among the black trees.

Only then did Dustfinger come out from behind the tree, put his rucksack on his back, pick up the two bags containing all his worldly goods, and stride off towards the gate, which was still open.

The night swallowed him up like a thieving fox.



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8

Alone

‘My darling,’ she said at last, ‘are you sure you don’t mind being a mouse for the rest of your life?’

‘I don’t mind at all,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t matter who you are or what you look like so long as somebody loves you.’

**Roald Dahl,
*The Witches***

Elinor was standing in the brightly lit doorway of the house when Meggie came back. She had put a coat on over her nightdress. The night was warm, but a cold wind was blowing from the lake. How desperate the child looked – and lost. Elinor remembered the feeling. There was nothing worse.

‘They’ve taken him away!’ Meggie’s voice almost choked in her helpless rage. She glared angrily at Elinor. ‘Why did you hold me back? We could have helped him!’ Her fists were clenched as if she wanted to hit out blindly.

Elinor remembered that feeling too. Sometimes you wanted to lash out at the whole world, but it did no good, none at all. The grief remained. ‘Don’t talk such nonsense!’ she said bluntly. ‘How could we have helped him? They’d just have taken you too, and how would your father have liked that? Would it have done him any good? No. So don’t stand around out here any longer – come indoors.’

But Meggie didn't move. 'They're taking him to Capricorn!' she whispered, so softly that Elinor could hardly make out what she was saying.

'Taking him where?'

Meggie just shook her head and wiped her sleeve over her tear-stained face.

'The police will be here any minute,' said Elinor. 'I called them on your father's mobile. I never wanted one of those, but now I think I'd better get one after all. They simply cut my phone line.'

Meggie still hadn't moved. She was trembling. 'They'll be well away by now anyway,' she said.

'Good heavens, I'm sure no harm will come to him!' Elinor wrapped her coat more closely around her. The wind was getting up. There would be rain soon, she felt sure.

'How do you know?' Meggie's voice was trembling with anger.

Heavens, thought Elinor, if looks could kill I'd be pushing up the daisies. 'Because he went with them of his own free will,' she said crossly. 'You heard him too, didn't you?'

Meggie bowed her head. Of course she'd heard him.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'He was more worried about the book than me.'

Elinor had no answer to that. Her own father had been firmly convinced that books deserved more attention than children, and when he suddenly died she and her two sisters had barely noticed his absence. It was as if he was just sitting in the library as usual, dusting his books. But Meggie's father wasn't like that.

'Nonsense, of course he was worried about you!' she said. 'I don't know any father who's more besotted with his daughter than yours. You wait and see, he'll soon be back. Now, do come in!' She reached out her hand to Meggie. 'I'll make you some

hot milk with honey. Isn't that what children get when they're really miserable?'

But Meggie ignored the hand. She turned suddenly and ran away as if something had occurred to her.

'Here, wait a minute!' Muttering crossly, Elinor slipped her feet into her gardening shoes and stumbled after her. The silly girl was running round behind the house to the place where the fire-eater had given his performance. But of course there was no one on the lawn now, just the burnt-out torches still stuck in the ground.

'Well, well, so Master Matchstick-Swallower seems to be gone too,' said Elinor. 'At least, he's not in the house.'

'Perhaps he followed them!' The girl went up to one of the burnt-out torches and touched its charred head. 'That's it! He saw what happened and followed them!' She looked hopefully at Elinor.

'Of course. That's what must have happened.' Elinor really did try hard not to sound sarcastic. How do you think he followed them she added silently in her mind. On foot? But instead of saying so out loud she put a hand on Meggie's shoulder. Heavens above, the girl was still shaking. 'Come on!' she said. 'The police will soon be here, and there's nothing we can do just now. Your father will surely turn up again in a few days' time, and perhaps your fire-breathing friend will be with him. You'll just have to put up with me in the meantime.'

Meggie merely nodded, and unresistingly let Elinor lead her back to the house.

'On one condition, though,' said Elinor, as they reached the front door.

Meggie looked at her suspiciously.

'While we're here on our own, do you think you could stop looking at me as if you wanted to poison me all the time? Could that be arranged?'

A small, sad little smile stole over Meggie's face. 'I should think so,' she said.

The two policemen whose car drew up on the gravel forecourt a little later asked a lot of questions, to which neither Elinor nor Meggie had many answers. No, they had never seen the men before. No, they hadn't stolen money or anything else of value, just a book. The two men exchanged amused glances when Elinor said that. She immediately gave them an angry lecture on the value of rare books, but that only made things worse. When Meggie finally said they'd be sure to find her father if they tracked down a bad man called Capricorn, they looked at each other as if she had seriously claimed that Mo had been carried off by the big bad wolf. Then they drove away again, and Elinor took Meggie to her room. The silly child had tears in her eyes once more, and Elinor hadn't the faintest idea how you set about comforting a girl of twelve, so she just told her, 'Your mother always slept in this room,' which was probably the worst thing she could have said. She quickly added, 'Read a story if you can't get to sleep,' cleared her throat twice, and then went back through the dark, empty house to her own room.

Why did it suddenly strike her as so big and so empty? In all the years she had lived alone here it had never troubled her to know that only her books awaited her behind all the doors. It was a long time since she and her sisters had played hide-and-seek in the many rooms. How quietly they always had to slip past the library door ...

Outside, the wind rattled the shutters of the windows. Heavens, I won't be able to sleep a wink, thought Elinor. And then she thought of the book waiting beside her bed, and with a mixture of anticipation and a very guilty conscience she disappeared into her bedroom.



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9

A Poor Exchange

**A strong and bitter book-sickness floods one's soul.
How ignominious to be strapped to this ponderous
mass of paper, print and dead man's sentiment.
Would it not be better, finer, braver to leave the
rubbish where it lies and walk out into the world a
free untrammelled illiterate Superman?**

Solomon Eagle

Meggie didn't sleep in her own bed that night. As soon as Elinor's footsteps had died away she ran to Mo's room. He hadn't unpacked yet, and his bag stood open beside the bed. Only his books were on the bedside table, and a partly eaten chocolate bar. Mo loved chocolate. Even the mustiest old chocolate Santa Claus wasn't safe from him. Meggie broke a square off the bar and put it in her mouth, but it tasted of nothing. Nothing but sadness.

Mo's quilt was cold when she crept under it, and the pillow didn't yet smell of him either, only of washing powder. Meggie put her hand under the pillow. Yes, there it was: not a book, a photograph. Meggie drew it out. It was a picture of her mother; Mo always kept it under his pillow. When she was little she believed that Mo had simply invented a mother for her one day because he thought she'd have liked to have one. He told wonderful stories about her. 'Did I like her?' Meggie always asked. 'Yes, very much.' – 'Where is she?' – 'She had to go away

when you were just three.’ – ‘Why?’ – ‘She just had to go away.’ – ‘A long way away?’ – ‘Yes, a very long way.’ – ‘Is she dead?’ – ‘No, I’m sure she isn’t.’ Meggie was used to the strange answers Mo gave to many of her questions. By the time she was ten she no longer believed in a mother made up by Mo, she believed in one who had simply gone away. These things happened. And as long as Mo was there she hadn’t particularly missed having a mother.

But now he was gone, and she was alone with Elinor and Elinor’s pebble eyes.

She took Mo’s sweater out of his bag and buried her face in it. It’s the book’s fault, she kept thinking. It’s all that book’s fault. Why didn’t he give it to Dustfinger? Sometimes, when you’re so sad you don’t know what to do, it helps to be angry. But then the tears came back again all the same, and Meggie fell asleep with the salty taste of them on her lips.

When she woke all of a sudden, her heart pounding and her hair damp with sweat, it all came back to her: the men, Mo’s voice, the empty road. I’ll go and look for him, thought Meggie. Yes, that’s what I’ll do. Outside the sky was just turning red. Not long now and the sun would rise. It would be better if she was gone before it got really light. Mo’s jacket was hanging over the chair under the window, as if he’d only just taken it off. Meggie took his wallet out of it – she’d need the money. Then she crept back to her room to pack a few things, only the essentials: a change of clothing and a photograph of herself and Mo, so that she could ask people if they’d seen him. Of course she couldn’t take her book-box. She thought of hiding it under the bed, but she decided to write Elinor a note instead:

Dear Elinor, she wrote, although she didn’t really think that was the correct way to address an aunt. *I have to go and look for my father,* she went on. *Don’t worry about me.* Well, Elinor wasn’t likely to do that anyway. *And please don’t tell the police I’ve gone or they’ll be sure to bring me back. My favourite books are*

in my box. I'm afraid I can't take them with me. Please look after them. I'll come and fetch them as soon as I've found my father. Thank you. Meggie.

P.S.: I know exactly how many books there are in the box.

She crossed out that last sentence. It would only annoy Elinor, and who knew what she might do with the books then? Sell them, probably. After all, Mo had given them all particularly nice bindings. None of them was bound in leather, because Meggie didn't like to think of a calf or a pig losing its skin for her books. Luckily, Mo understood how she felt. Many hundreds of years ago, he had once told Meggie, people made the bindings for particularly valuable books from the skin of unborn calves, *charta virginea non nata*, a pretty name for a terrible thing. 'And those books,' Mo had told her, 'were full of the most wonderful words about love and kindness and mercy.'

While Meggie was packing her bag she did her best not to think, because if she did she knew she'd have to ask herself where she was going to search for Mo. She kept pushing the thought away, but all the same her hands slowed down, and at last she was standing beside her packed bag, no longer able to ignore the cruel little voice inside her. 'Well then, where *are* you going to look, Meggie?' it whispered. 'Are you going to turn left or right when you reach the road? You don't even know that. How far do you think you'll get before the police pick you up? A twelve-year-old girl carrying a bag, with a wild story about a father who's disappeared, and no mother they can take her back to.'

Meggie put her hands over her ears, but what use was that when the voice was inside her head? She stood like that for quite a long time. Then she shook her head until the voice stopped, and dragged her bag out into the corridor. It was heavy. Much too heavy. Meggie opened it again and put almost everything back in her room. She kept only a sweater, a book (she had to have at least one), the photo and Mo's wallet. Now she could carry the bag as far as she had to.

She slipped quietly downstairs with the bag in one hand and the note for Elinor in the other. The morning sunlight was already filtering through the cracks of the shutters, but it was as silent in the big house as if even the books on the shelves were sleeping. Only the sound of quiet snoring came through Elinor's bedroom door. Meggie really meant to push the note under the door, but it wouldn't fit. She hesitated for a moment and then pressed the door-handle down. It was light in Elinor's bedroom, even though the shutters were closed. The bedside lamp was switched on, so obviously Elinor had gone to sleep while she was reading. She was lying on her back with her mouth slightly open, snoring at the plaster angel on the ceiling above her. And she was clutching a book to her chest. Meggie recognised it at once.

She was beside the bed in an instant. 'Where did you get that?' she shouted, tugging the book out of Elinor's arms, which were heavy with sleep. 'That's my father's!'

Elinor woke as suddenly as if Meggie had tipped cold water over her face.

'You stole it!' cried Meggie, beside herself with rage. 'And *you* brought those men here, yes, that's what happened. You and that Capricorn are in this together! You had my father taken away, and who knows what you did with poor Dustfinger? You wanted that book from the start! I saw the way you looked at it – like something alive! It's probably worth a million – or two million or three million ...'

Elinor was sitting up in bed, staring at the flowers on her nightdress and saying not a word. She didn't move until Meggie was struggling to get her breath back.

'Finished?' she asked. 'Or are you planning to stand there yelling your head off until you drop dead?' Her voice sounded as brusque as usual, but it had another note in it too – a touch of guilt.

‘I’m going to tell the police!’ cried Meggie. ‘I’ll tell them you stole the book and they ought to ask *you* where my father is.’

‘I *saved* you – and this book!’

Elinor swung her legs out of bed, went over to the window and opened the shutters.

‘Oh yes? And what about Mo?’ Meggie’s voice was rising again. ‘What’s going to happen when they realise he gave them the wrong book? It’s all your fault if they hurt him. Dustfinger said Capricorn would kill him if he didn’t hand over the book. He’ll kill him!’

Elinor put her head out of the window and took a deep breath. Then she turned round again. ‘What nonsense!’ she said crossly. ‘You think far too much of what that matchstick-eater says. And you’ve obviously read too many bad adventure stories. Kill your father? Heavens above, he’s not a secret agent or anything dangerous like that! He restores old books! It’s not exactly a life-threatening profession! I just wanted to take a look at the book in peace. That’s the only reason I swapped it round. How could I guess those villains would come here in the middle of the night to take your father away along with their precious book? All he told me was that some crazy collector had been badgering him for that book for years. How was I to know this collector wouldn’t shrink from breaking and entering, not to mention kidnapping? Even *I* wouldn’t think up an idea like that. Well, maybe for just one or two books in the world I might.’

‘But that’s what Dustfinger said. He said Capricorn would kill him!’ Meggie was clutching the book tightly, as if that were the only way of preventing yet more misfortunes from creeping out of it. It was as if she suddenly remembered Dustfinger’s voice again. ‘And the little creature’s screeching and struggling,’ she whispered, ‘would be as sweet as honey to him.’

‘What? Who are you talking about now?’ Elinor perched on the edge of the bed and made Meggie sit down beside her.

‘You’d better tell me everything you know about this business. Begin at the beginning.’

Meggie opened the book and leafed through the pages until she found the big ‘N’ with the animal that looked so like Gwin sitting on it.

‘Meggie! I’m talking to you!’ Elinor shook her roughly by the shoulders. ‘Who were you talking about just now?’

‘Capricorn.’ Meggie just whispered the name. Danger seemed to cling to it – to every single letter of it.

‘Capricorn. Go on. I’ve heard you mention that name a couple of times before. But who, for goodness’ sake, is this Capricorn?’

Meggie closed the book, stroked the binding, and looked at it from all sides. ‘It doesn’t give the title on the cover,’ she murmured.

‘No, not on the cover or inside.’ Elinor rose and went to her wardrobe. ‘There are a good many books where you can’t find the title straight away. After all, it’s a relatively modern habit to put it on the cover. When books were still bound so that the spines curved inwards the title might be on the side, if anywhere, but in most cases you found it out only when you opened the book. It wasn’t until bookbinders learned to make rounded spines that the title moved to the front of the book.’

‘Yes, I know!’ said Meggie impatiently. ‘But this isn’t an old book. I know what old books look like.’

Elinor looked at her ironically. ‘Oh, I apologise! I was forgetting you’re a real little expert. But you’re right, yes, this book isn’t very old. It was published almost exactly thirty-eight years ago. Ridiculously young for a book!’ She disappeared behind her open wardrobe door. ‘But of course it has a title all the same. It’s called *Inkheart*. I suspect your father intentionally bound it so that no one could identify it just from looking at the cover. You don’t even find the title on the first page, and when you look carefully you see that he’s removed it – the title page.’

Elinor's nightdress landed on the carpet, and Meggie saw a pair of tights being put on over her bare legs.

'We have to go to the police again,' said Meggie.

'What for?' Elinor threw a sweater over the wardrobe door. 'What are you going to tell them? Didn't you notice the way those two policemen looked at us last night?' Elinor imitated them: "'Oh yes, what was that again, Signora Loredan? Someone broke into your house after you'd been kind enough to switch off the burglar alarm? And then this amazingly cunning burglar stole just one book, although there are books worth millions in your library, and they took this girl's father away after he'd offered to go with them in any case? Yes, very interesting. And it seems that these men were working for a man called Capricorn. Doesn't that mean goat or something?" Heavens above, child!' Elinor emerged from behind the wardrobe door. She was wearing an unattractive check skirt and a caramel-coloured sweater that made her look as pale as dough. 'Everyone living around this lake thinks I'm crazy, and if we go back to the police with this story, then the news that Elinor Loredan has finally flipped will be all over the place. Which just goes to show that a passion for books is extremely unhealthy.'

'You dress like an old granny,' said Meggie.

Elinor looked down at herself. 'Thank you very much,' she said, 'but comments on my appearance are uncalled-for. Anyway, I *could* be your granny. With a little stretch of the imagination.'

'Have you ever been married?'

'No, why would I want to? And could you now kindly stop making personal remarks? Hasn't your father ever taught you that it's bad manners?'

Meggie did not reply. She wasn't sure herself why she had asked the question. 'This book is very valuable, isn't it?' she asked.

‘What, *Inkheart*?’ Elinor took it from Meggie’s hand, stroked the binding and then gave it back. ‘I think so. Although you won’t find a single copy in any of the catalogues or lists of valuable books. But I’m sure that many collectors would offer your father a very great deal of money if word got around that he has what may be the only copy. Actually, I found out quite a lot about it, and I believe it’s not just a rare book but a good one too. I can’t give an opinion on that. I scarcely managed a dozen pages last night. When the first fairy appeared I fell asleep. I never was particularly keen on stories full of fairies and dwarves and all that stuff.’

Elinor went round behind the wardrobe door again, obviously to look at herself in a mirror. Meggie’s comment on her clothes seemed to be bothering her after all. ‘Yes, I think it is very valuable,’ she repeated thoughtfully. ‘Although it’s almost forgotten now. Hardly anyone seems to remember what it’s about, hardly anyone seems to have read it. You can’t even find it in libraries. But now and then these strange stories about it do crop up: they say it’s been forgotten only because all the copies that still existed were stolen. I expect that’s nonsense. Although it’s not just plants and animals that die out, so do books. Quite often, I’m sorry to say. I’m sure you could fill a hundred houses like this one to the roof with all the books that have disappeared for ever.’ Elinor closed the wardrobe door again, and pinned up her hair with clumsy fingers. ‘As far as I know the author’s still alive, but obviously he’s never done anything about getting his book reprinted – which strikes me as odd. I mean, you write a story so that people will read it, don’t you? Well, perhaps he doesn’t like his own story any more, or perhaps it just sold so badly that no publisher was willing to bring it out again. How would I know?’

‘All the same, I don’t think they stole it just because it’s valuable,’ muttered Meggie.

‘You don’t?’ Elinor laughed out loud. ‘My word, you really are your father’s daughter! Mortimer could never imagine

people doing something bad for money, because money has never meant much to him. Do you have any idea what a book can be worth?’

Meggie looked at her crossly. ‘Yes, I do. But I still don’t think that’s the reason.’

‘I do. And Sherlock Holmes would think so too. Have you ever read those books, by the way? Wonderful stuff. Specially on rainy days.’ Elinor slipped her shoes on. She had strangely small feet for such a sturdily built woman.

‘Perhaps there’s some kind of secret in it,’ murmured Meggie, thoughtfully caressing the close-printed pages.

‘You mean something like invisible messages written in lemon juice, or a map hidden in one of the pictures showing where to find treasure?’ Elinor sounded so sarcastic that Meggie felt like wringing her short neck.

‘Why not?’ Meggie closed the book again and put it firmly under her arm. ‘Why else would they take Mo too? The book would have been enough.’

Elinor shrugged her shoulders.

Of course she can’t admit she never thought of that, Meggie told herself scornfully. She always has to be right!

Elinor looked at Meggie as if she had guessed her thoughts. ‘Listen, I tell you what, why don’t you read it?’ she said. ‘You really might find something that you don’t think belongs in the story. A few extra words here, a couple of unnecessary letters there – and there’s your secret message. The signpost pointing to the treasure. Who knows how long it will be before your father comes back? You’ll have to do something to pass the time here.’

Before Meggie could answer that one, Elinor bent to pick up a piece of paper lying on the carpet beside her bed. It was Meggie’s goodbye note. She must have dropped it when she saw the book in Elinor’s arms.

‘What on earth’s this?’ asked Elinor, when she had read it, frowning. ‘You were planning to go and look for your father? Where, for heaven’s sake? You’re even more foolish than I thought.’

Meggie pressed *Inkheart* close to her. ‘Who else is going to look for him?’ she said. Her lips began to tremble, and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it.

‘Well then, we’ll just have to go and look for him together!’ replied Elinor, sounding annoyed. ‘But first let’s give him a chance to come back. Do you think he’ll be pleased to get back here only to find you’ve disappeared, gone looking for him in the big wide world?’

Meggie shook her head. Elinor’s carpet was swimming before her eyes. A tear ran down her nose.

‘Right, that’s all settled, then,’ growled Elinor, offering Meggie a cotton handkerchief. ‘Blow your nose and then we’ll have breakfast.’

She wouldn’t let Meggie out of the house before she had eaten a roll and swallowed a glass of milk.

‘Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,’ she announced, buttering her own third slice of bread. ‘And what’s more, when your father gets back I don’t want you telling him I’ve been starving you. Like the wicked stepmother in the fairy tale, you know.’

An answer sprang to the tip of Meggie’s tongue, but she swallowed it along with the last of her roll, and took the book outside.



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10

The Lion's Den

Look. (Grown-ups skip this paragraph.) I'm not about to tell you this book has a tragic ending, I already said in the very first line how it was my favourite in all the world. But there's a lot of bad stuff coming.

**William Goldman,
*The Princess Bride***

Meggie sat on the bench behind the house. Dustfinger's burnt-out torches were still stuck in the ground beside it. She didn't usually hesitate so long before opening a book, but she was afraid of what was waiting for her inside this one. That was a brand-new feeling. She had never before been afraid of what a book would tell her. Far from it. Usually, she was so eager to let it lead her into an undiscovered world, one she had never been to before, that she often started to read at the most unsuitable moments. Both she and Mo often read at breakfast and, as a result, he had more than once taken her to school late. And she used to read under the desk at school too, and late at night in bed until Mo pulled back the covers and threatened to take all the books out of her room so that she'd get enough sleep for once. Of course he would never have done such a thing, and he knew she knew he wouldn't, but for a few days after such a threat she would put her book under her pillow around nine in the evening and let it go on whispering to her in

her dreams, so that Mo could feel he was being a really good father.

She wouldn't have put this book under her pillow, for fear of what it might whisper to her. For the very first time in her life Meggie wasn't sure that she wanted to enter the world waiting for her between the covers of a book. All the bad things that had happened over the last three days seemed to have come out of this book, and perhaps they were only a faint reflection of what still awaited her inside it.

All the same, she had to begin. Where else was she to look for Mo? Elinor was right; there was no point in simply running off at random. She had to look for Mo's trail among the printed letters in *Inkheart*. But she had hardly opened it at the first page when she heard footsteps behind her.

'You'll get sunstroke if you carry on sitting in the full sunlight,' said a familiar voice. Meggie spun round.

Dustfinger made her a bow. Of course his face wore its usual smile. 'Well, what a surprise!' he said, leaning over her shoulder and looking at the open book on her lap. 'So it's here after all. *You've got it.*'

Meggie was still looking uncomprehendingly at his scarred face. How could he stand there acting as if nothing had happened? 'Where've you been?' she snapped. 'Didn't they take you too? And where's Mo? Where have they taken him?' She couldn't get the words out fast enough.

But Dustfinger took his time over answering. He examined the bushes all around as if he had never seen anything like them before. He was wearing his coat, although the day was so hot that perspiration stood out in gleaming little beads on his forehead. 'No, they didn't take me too,' he said at last, turning to face Meggie again. 'But I saw them drive off with your father. I ran after them, right through the undergrowth, a couple of times I thought I'd break my neck going down that wretched slope, but I got to the gate just in time to see them

driving off south. Naturally I recognised them at once. Capricorn had sent his best men. Even Basta was with them.'

Meggie was staring at his lips as if she could make the words come out of them faster. 'Do you know where they've taken Mo?' Her voice shook with impatience.

'To Capricorn's village, I think. But I wanted to be sure,' said Dustfinger, taking off his coat and draping it over the bench, 'so I ran after them. I know it sounds silly to run after a car,' he added, when Meggie frowned in disbelief, 'but I was so furious. It had all been for nothing – me warning you, the three of us coming here ... Well, I managed to hitch a lift to the next village. They'd filled up the fuel tank there, four men in black, not very friendly. And they hadn't been gone long. So I ... er ... borrowed a moped and tried to go on after them. Don't look at me like that – you can set your mind at rest – I took the moped back later. It wasn't particularly fast, but luckily the roads are very, very winding here, and I eventually saw them again far down in the valley, while I was still making my way round the bends above them. Then I was sure they were taking your father to Capricorn's headquarters. Not to one of his hideouts further north, but straight to the lion's den.'

'The lion's den,' Meggie repeated. 'Where is it?'

'About three hundred kilometres south of here, I'd say.' Dustfinger sat down on the bench beside her and blinked as he peered at the sun. 'Not far from the coast.' Once again, he looked at the book still lying on Meggie's lap. 'Capricorn's not going to be pleased when his men bring him the wrong book,' he said. 'I only hope he doesn't take his disappointment out on your father.'

'But Mo didn't know it was the wrong book! Elinor swapped them round in secret.' There they came again, those infuriating tears! Meggie wiped her eyes on her sleeve. Dustfinger wrinkled his brow, looking at her as if he wasn't sure whether to believe her.

‘She says she just wanted to look at it! She had it in her bedroom. Mo knew the secret place where she’d hidden it, and because the book they took was wrapped in brown paper he never noticed it was the wrong one! And Capricorn’s men didn’t check either.’

‘Of course not. How could they?’ Dustfinger’s voice was full of scorn. ‘They can’t read. One book is much like any other to them, just printed paper. Anyway, they’re used to being given anything they want.’

Meggie’s voice was shrill with fear. ‘You must take me to that village! Please!’ She looked pleadingly at Dustfinger. ‘I’ll explain everything to Capricorn, and give him the book, and then he’ll let Mo go. All right?’

Dustfinger blinked up at the sun again. ‘Yes, of course,’ he said, without looking at Meggie. ‘That’s probably the only solution ...’

But before he could say any more they heard Elinor’s voice calling from the house. ‘Well, well, what have we here?’ she cried, leaning out of her open window. Its pale yellow curtain flapped in the wind as if a ghost were caught in it. ‘If it isn’t our friend the matchstick-swallower!’

Meggie jumped up and ran over the lawn towards her. ‘Elinor, he knows where Mo is!’ she cried.

‘Does he indeed?’ Elinor leaned on the windowsill and scrutinised Dustfinger through narrowed eyes. ‘Put that book down!’ she snapped at him. ‘Meggie, take the book away from him.’

Taken aback, Meggie turned round. Dustfinger really was holding *Inkheart*, but when Meggie looked at him he quickly put it back down on the bench. Then, with a nasty glance in Elinor’s direction, he beckoned her over. Hesitantly, Meggie went to him.

‘Yes, all right, I’ll take you to your father, even though it may be dangerous for me,’ whispered Dustfinger when she was

beside him. ‘But *she* stays here, understand?’ He slyly nodded his head in Elinor’s direction.

Meggie looked uncertainly at the house.

‘Like me to guess what he whispered to you?’ called Elinor across the lawn.

Dustfinger cast Meggie a warning glance, but she ignored it. ‘He’s going to take me to Mo!’ she called back.

‘A good idea,’ called Elinor, ‘but I’m coming too. Even if the pair of you might prefer to do without my company!’

‘We certainly might!’ muttered Dustfinger, smiling guilelessly at Elinor. ‘But who knows, perhaps we can swap her for your father? I dare say Capricorn could do with another maidservant. I know she’s no good at cooking, but perhaps she can do the laundry – even if that’s not something you learn from books.’

Meggie had to laugh – although she couldn’t tell from Dustfinger’s face if he was joking or meant it seriously.



11

A Coward

Home! That was what they meant, those caressing appeals, those soft touches wafted through the air, those invisible little hands pulling and tugging, all one way.

Kenneth Grahame,
The Wind in the Willows

Dustfinger did not steal into Meggie's room until he was quite sure she was asleep. She had locked her door. Undoubtedly Elinor had persuaded her to do that, because she didn't trust him and because Meggie had refused to give *Inkheart* back to her. Dustfinger couldn't help smiling as he inserted the thin wire into the lock. What a stupid woman she was, in spite of all those books she'd read! Did she really think such an ordinary lock was any obstacle? 'Well, perhaps it might be for fat fingers like yours, Elinor!' he whispered to himself as he opened the door. 'But my fingers play with fire, and it's made them quick and skilful.'

His liking for Silvertongue's daughter was a more serious obstacle, and his guilty conscience didn't make matters any easier. Yes, Dustfinger did have a guilty conscience as he crept into Meggie's room, although he hadn't come to steal the book. Naturally Capricorn still wanted it – the book and Silvertongue's daughter too, those were his new orders. But that must wait. Tonight, Dustfinger was there for a different reason.

Tonight, something that had been gnawing at his heart for years drove him to Meggie's room.

He stood thoughtfully beside the bed, looking at the sleeping girl. Betraying her father to Capricorn had not been particularly difficult, but with her it would be different. Her face reminded Dustfinger of another one, although no grief had yet left dark shadows on Meggie's childish features. Strange, every time the girl looked at him he felt a wish to show her that he *didn't* deserve the distrust he always saw in her eyes, even when she was smiling at him. She looked at her father in a very different way – as if he could protect her from all the dark and evil in the world. What a stupid, stupid idea! No one would be able to protect her from that.

Dustfinger stroked the scars on his face and frowned. Enough of such useless thoughts. He would take Capricorn what he wanted: the girl and the book. But not tonight.

Gwin moved on his shoulder, trying to wriggle out of his collar, which he liked as little as he liked the dog's leash Dustfinger always carried with him. He wanted to go hunting, but Dustfinger wasn't letting him out. Last night the marten had run away from him while he was talking to Basta. The furry little devil was still afraid of Basta. Dustfinger couldn't blame him.

Meggie was sleeping soundly, her face buried in a grey sweater, probably her father's. She murmured something in her sleep but Dustfinger couldn't make out what. Once again his guilty conscience stirred, but he pushed the tiresome feeling away. He couldn't do with that kind of thing, not now and not later. The girl was nothing to do with him, and he was quits with her father now. Yes, quits. He had no reason to feel like a miserable double-dealing villain.

He looked round the dark room, in search of something. Where would Meggie put the book? There was a red box beside

her bed. Dustfinger lifted the lid. Gwin's chain clinked softly as he leaned forward.

The box was full of books – wonderful books. Dustfinger took out the torch from under his coat and shone it on them. 'Look at that!' he murmured. 'What beauties! Like a party of ladies dressed in their best to go to a prince's ball.' Silvertongue had probably rebound them after Meggie's little fingers had worn out the old bindings. Yes, of course, there was his sign, the unicorn's head. Each book bore it, and each was bound in a different colour. All the hues of the rainbow were gathered together in that box.

The book Dustfinger was looking for was right at the bottom. With its silvery green binding it looked plain, a poor thing among all the other grand and lordly volumes.

It didn't surprise Dustfinger that Silvertongue had given this book such a plain dress to wear. Very likely Meggie's father hated it as much as he loved it. Dustfinger carefully extracted it from the other books. It was almost nine years since he last had it in his hands. At the time it had still had a cardboard binding and a torn paper dust-jacket.

Dustfinger raised his head. Meggie sighed, and moved until her sleeping face was turned his way. How unhappy she looked. She must be having a nightmare. Her lips quivered, and her hands clutched the sweater as if she were looking for something – or someone – to give her security. But you are usually alone in nightmares, dreadfully alone. Dustfinger remembered many of his own bad dreams and, for a moment, he was tempted to put out his hand and wake Meggie. What a soft-hearted fool he was!

He turned his back to the bed. Out of sight, out of mind. Then he opened the book hastily before he could think better of it. His breathing was heavy – as if he had filled his mouth with liquid in preparation for breathing fire. He leafed through the first few pages, and began to read, slowly turning page after

page after page. But with every page his fingers hesitated a little longer, until suddenly he closed the book. Moonlight was seeping through the cracks in the shutters. He had no idea how long he had been standing there, his eyes lost in the labyrinth of letters. He had always been a very slow reader ...

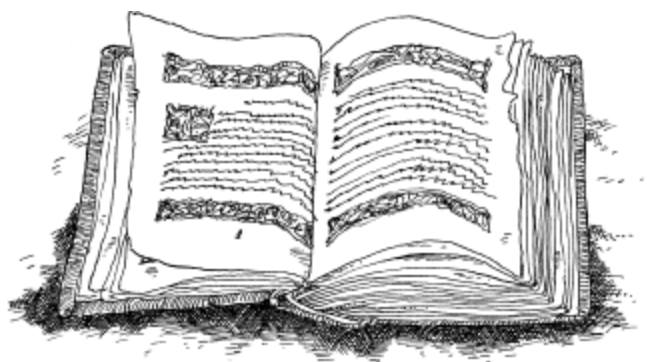
‘Coward!’ he whispered. ‘Oh, what a coward you are, Dustfinger!’ He bit his lips until they hurt. ‘Come on!’ he told himself. ‘This may be your last chance, you fool! Once Capricorn has the book he’ll never let you look at it again.’ Once more, he opened the book, leafed rapidly through to about the middle – and closed it again, with a sound loud enough to make Meggie give a little start in her sleep and bury her head under the covers. Dustfinger waited motionless beside the bed until she was breathing regularly again, then leaned over her treasure chest with a deep sigh and put the book back under the others.

Soundlessly, he closed the lid.

‘Did you see that, Gwin?’ he whispered to the marten. ‘I just dare not look. Wouldn’t you rather find a braver master? Think it over.’ Gwin chattered softly in his ear, but if that was an answer Dustfinger didn’t understand it.

For a moment he went on listening to Meggie’s quiet breathing, then stole back to the door. ‘Well, what does it matter?’ he muttered when he was out in the corridor. ‘Who wants to know the end of a story in advance?’

He climbed up to the attic bedroom Elinor had given him and lay down on the narrow bed with the crates of books towering around it. But he could not sleep until morning came.



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12

Going Further South

The Road goes ever on and on
Down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
And I must follow, if I can,
Pursuing it with weary feet,
Until it joins some larger way
Where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say.

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring

After breakfast next morning Elinor spread a crumpled road map out on the kitchen table. 'Right, three hundred kilometres south of here,' she said with a wary glance at Dustfinger. 'So show us exactly where we have to look for Meggie's father.'

Meggie looked at Dustfinger, her heart thudding. There were dark shadows round his eyes, as if he had slept very badly. Hesitantly, he came over to the table, rubbing his stubbly chin. He bent over the map, scrutinised it for what seemed an eternity, and finally pointed with his finger.

'There,' he said. 'Capricorn's village is just there.'

Elinor looked over his shoulder. 'Liguria,' she said. 'Aha. And what is the name of this village, if I may ask? Capricornia?' She

was examining Dustfinger's face as if tracing his scars with her eyes.

'It doesn't have a name.' Dustfinger responded to her gaze with unconcealed dislike. 'I expect it had one once, but the name was already forgotten before Capricorn settled there. You won't find it on this map, or any other either. To the rest of the world the village is just a collection of tumbledown houses reached along what can hardly be called a road.'

'Hmm.' Elinor bent closer to the map. 'I've never been in that region. I was in Genoa once. I bought a very fine edition of *Alice in Wonderland* there, in good condition and for half what it was worth.' She looked enquiringly at Meggie. 'Do you like *Alice in Wonderland*?'

'Not particularly,' said Meggie, staring at the map. Elinor shook her head at such childish folly, and turned back to Dustfinger.

'What does this Capricorn do when he's not stealing books and abducting people's fathers?' she asked. 'If I understand Meggie correctly, you know him pretty well.'

Dustfinger avoided her eyes and ran his finger along a blue river winding its way through the green and pale brown of the map. 'We come from the same place,' he said. 'But apart from that we don't have much in common.'

Elinor looked at him so penetratingly that Meggie would not have been surprised to see a hole suddenly appear in his forehead. 'There's one thing that strikes me as strange,' she said. 'Meggie's father wanted to keep *Inkheart* safe from this Capricorn. So why bring the book here to me? He was practically running into Capricorn's arms!'

Dustfinger shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, perhaps he just thought your library would be the safest hiding-place.'

A memory stirred in Meggie's mind. At first, she couldn't identify it, but then it all came flooding back to her, perfectly clearly, as vivid as a picture in a book. She saw Dustfinger

standing beside their camper van at the gate of the farmhouse, and it was almost as if she heard his voice again ...

She looked at him in horror. 'You told Mo that Capricorn was in the *north!*' she said. 'He specially asked, and you said you were sure of it.'

Dustfinger examined his fingernails.

'Well, yes ... yes, that's right,' he admitted, without looking at Meggie or Elinor. He just went on staring at his nails. Finally, he rubbed them on his sweater as if to remove an ugly mark. 'You don't trust me,' he said hoarsely, still without looking at them. 'Neither of you trust me. I—I can understand that, but I wasn't lying. Capricorn has two main headquarters, and several smaller hideouts in case things get too hot for him, or one of his men needs to disappear for a while. He usually spends the summer months in the north and doesn't come south until October, but this year he's obviously spending the summer down in the south. How would I know why? Perhaps he had trouble with the police in the north? Perhaps he has business of some kind in the south and wants to see to it personally?' His voice sounded injured, like the voice of a child unjustly accused. 'In any case, his men drove south with Meggie's father, I saw them go myself, and when Capricorn is in the south he always does anything of importance in that village. He feels safe in it, safer than anywhere else. He's never had any trouble with the police there, he can act like a king, as if the whole world belonged to him. He makes the laws, he decides what happens, he can do or not do anything he likes. His men take care of that. Believe you me, I understand these things.' Dustfinger smiled. It was a bitter smile. It seemed to be saying: if only you knew! But you don't know anything. You don't understand anything.

Meggie felt unease spread through her again. It was not caused by what Dustfinger said, but by what he wasn't saying. Nothing is more frightening than a fear you cannot name.

Elinor seemed to be feeling the same. 'For heaven's sake, don't make such a mystery of it!' she snapped. 'I'm asking you again, what does this Capricorn do? How does he earn his money?'

Dustfinger crossed his arms. 'You won't get any more information out of me. Ask him yourself. Even taking you to his village could cost me dear, so am I going to tell you about Capricorn's business? Not likely!' He shook his head. 'I warned Meggie's father. I advised him to take Capricorn the book of his own free will, but he wouldn't listen. If I hadn't warned him, Capricorn's men would have found him much sooner. Ask Meggie! She was there when I warned him. Right, I didn't tell him everything I knew. So what? I talk about Capricorn as little as possible, I try not even to think of him, and you take my word for it, once you know him you'll feel the same.'

Elinor wrinkled her nose as if such an idea were too ridiculous for her to waste a single word on it. 'So I assume you can't tell me why he's so keen to get hold of this book?' she asked, folding up the road map. 'Is he some kind of collector?'

Dustfinger ran his finger along the edge of the table. 'All I'm going to tell you is that he wants this book. And that's why you'd better give it to him. I once knew his men to stand outside a man's house for four nights running just because Capricorn took a fancy to the man's dog.'

'Did he get the dog?' asked Meggie quietly.

'Of course,' replied Dustfinger, looking at her thoughtfully. 'Believe me, no one sleeps soundly with Capricorn's men standing outside the door looking up at their window – or their children's window. Capricorn usually gets what he wants within a couple of days, maximum.'

'Disgusting!' said Elinor. 'He wouldn't have got *my* dog.'

Dustfinger examined his fingernails again, smiling.

'Stop grinning like that!' snapped Elinor. And, turning to Meggie, she added, 'You'd better pack a few things! We set off

within the hour. It's about time you got your father back. Even if I don't like having to leave the book with this Capri-what's-his-name. I hate to see books fall into the wrong hands.'

They were going in Elinor's estate car, although Dustfinger would have preferred to travel in Mo's camper van.

'Nonsense, I've never driven anything like that,' said Elinor, dumping in Dustfinger's arms a cardboard box full of provisions for the journey. 'Anyway, Mortimer's locked the van.'

Meggie saw that Dustfinger had an answer on the tip of his tongue, but chose to keep it to himself. 'Suppose we have to spend the night somewhere?' he asked, carrying the box over to Elinor's car.

'Heavens above, who said anything about that? I intend to be back here tomorrow morning at the latest. I hate leaving my books on their own for more than a day.'

Dustfinger rolled his eyes up at the sky, as if more sense might be expected there than in Elinor's head, and began clambering into the back seat, but Elinor stopped him. 'No, wait, you'd better drive,' she said, handing him her car keys. 'You're the one who knows where we're going.'

But Dustfinger gave her back the keys. 'I can't drive,' he said. 'It's bad enough sitting in a car, never mind driving it.'

Elinor got behind the steering wheel, shaking her head. 'Well, you're an oddity and no mistake!' she said as Meggie climbed into the passenger seat beside her. 'And I hope you really do know where Meggie's father is, or you'll find out that this Capricorn of yours isn't the only person to be frightened of around here!'

Meggie wound down her window as Elinor started the engine. She looked back at Mo's van. It felt bad leaving it behind here, worse than leaving a house, even this one. Strange as a place might be, the camper van meant that Mo and she always had a bit of home with them. Now that was gone too,

and nothing was familiar any more except the clothes in her travelling bag in the boot of the estate car. She had also packed a few things for Mo – and two of her books.

‘Interesting choice!’ Elinor had commented when she lent Meggie a bag for the books, an old-fashioned one made of dark leather that you could sling over your shoulder. ‘These stories about the ill-made knight, and people with hairy feet going on a long journey to dark places. Have you read them both?’

Meggie had nodded. ‘Lots of times,’ she smiled at Elinor’s descriptions, stroking the bindings before she put the books in the bag. She could remember every detail of the day when Mo had rebound them.

‘Oh dear, don’t look so dismal!’ Elinor had said, looking at her with concern. ‘You just wait – our journey isn’t going to be half as bad as those hairy-footed people’s quest. It will be much shorter too.’

Meggie would have been glad to feel as sure of that herself. The book that was the reason for their own journey was in the boot, under the spare tyre. Elinor had put it in a plastic bag. ‘Don’t let Dustfinger see where it is!’ she urged Meggie, before putting it into her hands. ‘I still don’t trust him.’

But Meggie had decided to trust Dustfinger. She wanted to trust him. She needed to trust him. Who else could lead her to Mo?



13

Capricorn's Village

‘But to the last question,’ Zelig replied, ‘he probably flew to beyond the Dark Regions, where people don’t go and cattle don’t stray, where the sky is copper, the earth iron, and where the evil forces live under roofs of petrified toadstools and in tunnels abandoned by moles.’

**Isaac Bashevis Singer,
*Naftali the Storyteller***

The sun was already high in the cloudless sky when they set off. Soon the air was so hot and muggy in Elinor’s car that Meggie’s T-shirt was sticking to her skin with sweat. Elinor opened her window and passed a bottle of water round. She herself was wearing a knitted jacket buttoned up to her chin, and when Meggie wasn’t thinking of Mo or Capricorn she wondered whether Elinor might melt away inside it.

Dustfinger sat on the back seat, so silent that you could almost have forgotten he was there. He had put Gwin on his lap. The marten slept while Dustfinger’s hands restlessly stroked his fur, passing over it again and again. Now and then Meggie turned to look at him. He was usually gazing out of the window indifferently, as if he were looking straight through the mountains and trees, houses and rocky slopes passing by outside. His expression seemed perfectly empty, as if he were thinking of something far away, and once, when Meggie

glanced round, there was such sadness on his scarred face that she quickly turned to look out of the windscreen ahead of her.

She would have liked to have an animal on her own lap during this long, long journey. Perhaps it would have driven away the dark thoughts that insisted on coming into her mind. Outside, the world was a place of gently unfolding mountains rising higher and higher. Sometimes it seemed as if they would crush the road between their grey and rocky sides. But worse than the mountains were the tunnels. Pictures seemed to lurk in them that not even Gwin's warm body could have kept at bay. They seemed to be hiding there in the darkness, waiting for Meggie: pictures of Mo in some dark, cold place, and of Capricorn ... Meggie knew it must be Capricorn, although his face was different every time.

She tried reading for a while, but soon noticed that she wasn't taking in a word of what she read, so she gave it up and stared out of the window like Dustfinger. Elinor chose minor roads without much traffic on them. 'Otherwise the driving gets so boring,' she said. It made no difference to Meggie. She just wanted to arrive. She looked impatiently at the mountains, and the houses where other people lived. Sometimes, through the window of a car coming the other way, she caught a glimpse of a stranger's face, and then it was gone, like a book you open then close at once. When they were driving through one village she saw a man by the roadside sticking a plaster on the grazed knee of a tearful little girl. He was stroking her hair comfortingly, and Meggie couldn't help remembering how often Mo had done that for her, how he sometimes chased all round the house, cursing when he couldn't find a plaster in time. The memory brought tears to her eyes.

'Heavens above, it's quieter in here than in a Pharaoh's burial chamber!' said Elinor at some point. (Meggie thought she said 'Heavens above' rather a lot.) 'Couldn't one of you at least say something now and then? "Oh, what a lovely landscape!", for instance, or, "That's a very fine castle!" If you keep as deathly

quiet as this I'll be falling asleep at the wheel any minute now.' She still hadn't undone a single button of her knitted jacket.

'I don't see any castle,' muttered Meggie, but it wasn't long before Elinor spotted one. 'Sixteenth century,' she announced as the ruined walls appeared on a mountainside. 'Tragic story. Forbidden love, pursuit, death, grief and pain.' And as they passed between the strong and silent rock walls Elinor told the tale of a battle that had raged in this very place over six hundred years ago. 'To this day, if you dig among the stones you'll still find bones and dented helmets.' She seemed to know a story about every church tower. Some were so unlikely that Meggie wrinkled her brow in disbelief, and Elinor, without taking her eyes off the road, always responded, 'No, really, that's just what happened!' She seemed to be particularly fond of bloodthirsty stories: tales of the beheading of unhappy lovers, or princes walled up alive. 'Yes, everything looks very peaceful now,' she remarked when Meggie turned a little pale at one of these stories. 'But I can tell you there's always a sad story somewhere. Ah, well, times were more exciting a few hundred years ago.'

Meggie didn't know what was so exciting about times when, if Elinor was to be believed, your only choice was between dying of the plague or getting slaughtered by invading soldiers. But Elinor's cheeks glowed pink with excitement at the sight of some burnt-out old castle, and whenever she told tales of the warrior princes and greedy bishops who had once spread terror and death abroad in the very mountains through which they themselves were now driving on modern paved roads, a romantic gleam lit her usually chilly pebble eyes.

'My dear Elinor, you were obviously born into the wrong story,' said Dustfinger at last. These were the first words he had spoken since they set out.

'The wrong story? The wrong period, you mean. Yes, I've often thought so myself.'

‘Call it what you like,’ said Dustfinger. ‘Anyway, you should get on well with Capricorn. He likes the same kinds of stories as you.’

‘Is that supposed to be an insult?’ asked Elinor, offended. The comparison seemed to trouble her, for after that she kept quiet for almost an hour, which left Meggie with nothing to distract her from her miserable thoughts and the frightening pictures they conjured up for her in every tunnel.

Twilight was beginning to fall when the mountains drew back from the road and the sea suddenly appeared beyond green hills, a sea as wide as another sky. The sinking sun made it glisten like the skin of a beautiful snake. It was a long time since Meggie had seen the sea, and then it had been a cold sea, slate-grey and pale from the wind. This sea looked different, very different.

It warmed Meggie’s heart just to see it, but all too often it disappeared behind the tall, ugly buildings covering the narrow strip of land that lay between the water and the encroaching hills. Sometimes, the hills reached all the way down to the sea, and in the light of the setting sun they looked as if they were giant waves that had rolled up on to the land.

As they followed the winding coastal road Elinor began telling stories again: tales of the Romans who, she said, had built the road they were on, and how they feared the savage inhabitants of this narrow strip of land. Meggie was only half listening. Palm trees grew beside the road, their fronds dusty and sharp-edged. Giant agaves flowered among the palms, looking like spiders squatting there with their long spiny leaves. The light behind them turned pink and lemon-yellow as the sun sank further down towards the sea, and dark blue trickled down from the sky like ink flowing into water. It was so beautiful a sight that it almost hurt to look at it. Meggie had thought the place where Capricorn lived would be quite different. Beauty and fear make uneasy companions.

They drove through a small town, past houses as bright as if a child had painted them. They were colour-washed orange and pink, red and yellow. A great many were yellow: pale yellow, brownish yellow, sandy yellow, dirty yellow, and they had green shutters and red-brown roofs. Even the gathering twilight couldn't drain them of their brightness.

'It doesn't seem so very dangerous here,' remarked Meggie, as they drove past another pink house.

'That's because you keep looking to your left,' said Dustfinger behind her. 'But there's always a light side and a dark side. Look to your right for a change.'

Meggie did as he said. At first she saw nothing but the brightly coloured houses there too. They crowded close to the roadside, leaning against each other as if they were arm in arm. But then the houses were suddenly left behind, and steep hills with the night already settling among their folds lined the road instead. Yes, Dustfinger was right. It looked sinister over there, and the few houses left seemed to be drowning in the gathering dusk.

It quickly grew darker, for night falls fast in the south, and Meggie was glad that Elinor was driving along the well lit coastal road. But all too soon Dustfinger told her to turn off along a minor road leading away from the coast, away from the sea and the brightly coloured houses, and into the dark.

The road wound further and further into the hills, going up and down as the slopes by the roadside grew steeper and steeper. The light of the headlamps fell on gorse, on vines run wild, and olive trees crouching like bent old men beside the road.

Only twice did they meet another vehicle coming towards them. Now and then the lights of a village emerged from the darkness. But the roads along which Dustfinger guided Elinor led away from the lights and deeper and deeper into the night. Several times the beam of the headlights fell on ruined houses,

but Elinor didn't know stories about any of them. No princes had lived in those wretched hovels, no red-robed bishops, only farmers and labourers whose stories no one had written down, and now they were lost, buried under wild thyme and fast-growing gorse.

'Are we still going the right way?' asked Elinor in a muted voice, as if the world around her were too quiet for anyone to speak out loud. 'Where on earth do we find a village in this God-forsaken wilderness? We've probably taken at least two wrong turnings already.'

But Dustfinger only shook his head. 'We're going the right way,' he replied. 'Once we're over that hill you'll be able to see the houses.'

'I certainly hope so!' muttered Elinor. 'I can hardly make out the road. Heavens above, I had no idea anywhere in the world was still so dark. Couldn't you have told me what a long way it was? Then I'd have filled up the tank again. I don't even know if we have enough fuel to make it back to the coast.'

'So whose car is this?' Dustfinger snapped back. 'Mine? I told you I don't know the first thing about cars. Now, keep your eyes on the road. We'll be coming to the bridge any moment.'

'Bridge?' Elinor drove round the next bend and suddenly stamped on the brake. Right across the road, lit by two builders' lamps, was a metal barrier. It looked rusty, as if it had stood there for years.

'There!' said Elinor, clapping her hands on the steering wheel. 'We *have* gone the wrong way. I told you so.'

'No, we haven't.' Dustfinger took Gwin off his shoulder and got out of the car. He looked round, listening intently as he approached the barrier, then dragged it over to the side of the road.

Elinor's look of disbelief almost made Meggie laugh out loud. 'Has the man gone right out of his mind?' she whispered. 'He

doesn't think I'm going to drive down a closed road in this darkness, does he?'

All the same, she started the engine when Dustfinger impatiently waved her on. As soon as she was past him he pulled the barrier back across the road.

'No need to look at me like that!' he said, climbing back into the car. 'The barrier's always there. Capricorn had it put up to keep unwanted visitors away. Not that people often venture up here. Capricorn spreads stories about the village that keep most of them at a distance, but—'

'What sort of stories?' Meggie interrupted him, although she didn't think she really wanted to know.

'Blood-curdling stories,' said Dustfinger. 'Like most folk, the locals round here are superstitious. The most common tale is that the Devil himself lives on the far side of that hill.'

Meggie was cross with herself for being scared, but now she just couldn't take her eyes off the dark hilltop. 'Mo says human beings invented the Devil,' she said.

'Well, maybe.' Dustfinger's mysterious smile was hovering round his mouth again. 'But you wanted to know about the stories. They say no bullet can kill the men who live in that village, they can walk through walls, they kidnap three boys every month when the moon is new, and Capricorn teaches them to commit theft, arson and murder.'

'Good heavens, who thought all that up? The folk of these parts or this man Capricorn himself?' Elinor was leaning right over the steering wheel. The road was full of potholes, and she had to drive very slowly so as not to get stuck.

'Both.' Dustfinger leaned back and let Gwin nibble his fingers. 'Capricorn rewards people who think up new stories. The one man who never joins in that game is Basta. He's so superstitious himself he even goes out of his way to avoid black cats.'

Basta. Meggie remembered the name, but before she could ask any more questions Dustfinger was speaking again. He seemed to enjoy telling these tales. 'Oh yes, I almost forgot!

Of course everyone living in the village of the damned has the Evil Eye, even the women.'

'The Evil Eye?' Meggie looked at him.

'That's right. One glance and you fall mortally ill. Three days after that, at the latest, and you're dead as a doornail.'

'Who'd believe a thing like that?' murmured Meggie, turning to look ahead of her again.

'Idiots would.' Elinor stamped on the brake again. The car skidded over gravel on the road. The bridge Dustfinger had mentioned lay ahead, its grey stone pale in the headlights.

'Go on, go on!' said Dustfinger impatiently. 'It'll hold, though you might not think so.'

'It looks as if the ancient Romans built it,' muttered Elinor. 'But for donkeys, not cars.'

All the same, Elinor drove on. Meggie squeezed her eyes tight shut, and didn't open them until she could hear the gravel under the car tyres once more.

'Capricorn likes this bridge a lot,' said Dustfinger quietly. 'A single well-armed man is enough to make it impassable. But luckily he doesn't post a guard here every night.'

'Dustfinger.' Meggie turned hesitantly to look at him as Elinor's car laboured up the last hill. 'What are we going to say when they ask us how we found the village? I mean, it's not going to be a good idea for Capricorn to know that you showed us the way, is it?'

'No, you're right,' muttered Dustfinger, avoiding Meggie's eyes. 'Although we are bringing him the book.' He picked up Gwin, who was clambering around the back seat, held him so that he couldn't snap, and then lured him into the rucksack

with a piece of bread. The marten had been restless ever since darkness fell. He wanted to go hunting.

They had reached the top of the hill. The world around them had disappeared from view, swallowed up by the night, but not far away a few pale rectangles glowed in the dark. Lighted windows.

‘There it is,’ said Dustfinger. ‘Capricorn’s village. Or the Devil’s village, if you prefer.’ He laughed softly.

Elinor turned to him crossly. ‘For heaven’s sake, will you stop that!’ she snapped at him. ‘You really seem to like these stories. Who knows, perhaps they’re all your own invention, and this Capricorn is just a rather eccentric book collector!’

Dustfinger made no reply, but only looked out of the window with the strange smile that Meggie sometimes wanted to wipe off his face. Yet again it seemed to be saying: how stupid you two are!

Elinor had switched off the engine. The silence surrounding them was so absolute that Meggie hardly dared to breathe. She looked down at the lighted windows. Usually, she thought brightly lit windows were an inviting sight in the dark, but these seemed far more menacing than the darkness all around.

‘Does this village have any normal inhabitants?’ asked Elinor. ‘Harmless old grannies, children, people who don’t have anything to do with Capricorn?’

‘No. Nobody lives there but Capricorn and his men,’ whispered Dustfinger, ‘and the women who cook and clean and so on for them.’

“‘And so on’ ... oh, wonderful!’ Elinor snorted with distaste. ‘I like the sound of this Capricorn less and less! Right, let’s get this over and done with. I want to go home to my books, proper electric light and a nice cup of coffee.’

‘Really? I thought you were longing for a little adventure?’

If Gwin could speak, thought Meggie, he'd do so in Dustfinger's voice.

'I prefer adventures in the sunlight,' replied Elinor curtly. 'Heavens, how I hate this darkness! Still, if we sit around here until dawn my books will be mildewed before Mortimer can do anything about them. Meggie, go round to the back of the car and fetch that bag. You know the one.'

Meggie nodded, and was just about to open the passenger door when a glaring light blinded her. Someone whose face she couldn't make out was standing beside the driver's door, shining a torch into the car. He tapped it commandingly against the pane.

Elinor jumped in such alarm she hit her knee on the steering wheel, but she quickly pulled herself together. Cursing, she rubbed her hurt leg and opened the window.

'What's the idea?' she snapped at the stranger. 'Do you have to frighten us to death? A person could easily get run over, skulking about in the dark like that.'

By way of answer the stranger pushed the barrel of a shotgun through the open window. 'This is private property!' he said. Meggie thought she recognised the rasping cat's-tongue voice from Elinor's library. 'And a person can very easily get shot trespassing on private property at night.'

'I can explain.' Dustfinger leaned over Elinor's shoulder.

'Well, well, who have we here? If it isn't Dustfinger!' The man withdrew the barrel of his gun. 'Do you *have* to turn up in the middle of the night?'

Elinor turned and cast Dustfinger a glance that was more than suspicious. 'I'd no idea you were on such friendly terms with these people!' she commented. 'You called them devils!'

But Dustfinger was already out of the car. And Meggie didn't like the familiar way the two men were talking. She remembered exactly what Dustfinger had said to her about

Capricorn's men. How could he talk to one of them like this? However hard Meggie strained her ears, she couldn't make out what the pair were saying. She caught only one thing. Dustfinger called the stranger Basta.

'I don't like this!' whispered Elinor. 'Look at the pair of them. They're talking to each other as if our matchstick-eating friend can come and go here as he likes!'

'He probably knows they won't hurt him because we're bringing them the book!' Meggie whispered back, never taking her eyes off the two men. The stranger had a couple of dogs with him. German shepherds. They were sniffing Dustfinger's hands and nuzzling him in the ribs, wagging their tails.

'See that?' hissed Elinor. 'Even those dogs treat him as an old friend. Suppose—'

But before she could say any more Basta opened the driver's door. 'Get out, both of you,' he ordered.

Reluctantly, Elinor swung her legs out of the car. Meggie got out too and stood beside her. Her heart was thudding. She had never seen a man with a gun before. Well, on TV she had, but not in real life.

'Look, I don't like your tone!' Elinor informed Basta. 'We've had a strenuous drive, and we only came to this God-forsaken spot to bring your boss or whatever you call him something he's been wanting for a long time. So let's have a little more civility.'

Basta cast her such a scornful glance that Elinor drew in a sharp breath, and Meggie involuntarily squeezed her hand.

'Where did you pick *her* up?' enquired Basta, turning back to Dustfinger, who was standing there looking as unmoved as if none of this had anything at all to do with him.

'She owns that house – you know the one I mean.' Dustfinger had lowered his voice. but Meggie heard him all the same. 'I didn't want to bring her, but she insisted.'

‘I can imagine that.’ Basta scrutinised Elinor once again, then turned to Meggie. ‘So this is Silvertongue’s little daughter? Doesn’t look much like him.’

‘Where’s my father?’ asked Meggie. ‘How is he?’ These were the first words she had managed to utter. Her voice was hoarse, as if she hadn’t used it for a long time.

‘Oh, he’s fine,’ replied Basta, glancing at Dustfinger. ‘Although he’s saying so little at the moment that *Leaden-tongue* would be more like it.’

Meggie bit her lip. ‘We’ve come for him,’ she said. Now her voice was high and thin, although she was trying as hard as she could to sound grown-up. ‘We have the book, but we won’t give it to Capricorn unless he lets my father go.’

Basta turned to Dustfinger again. ‘Something about her does remind me of her father after all. See her lips tighten? And that look! Oh yes, anyone can see they’re related.’ His voice sounded as if he were joking, but there was nothing funny about his face when he looked at Meggie again. It was thin, sharply angular, with close-set eyes. He narrowed them slightly as if he could see better that way. Basta was not a tall man, and his shoulders were almost as narrow as a boy’s, but Meggie held her breath when he took a step towards her. She was afraid of him. She had never been so afraid of anyone before, and it wasn’t because of the shotgun in his hand. He had an aura of fury about him, of something keen and biting—

‘Meggie, get the bag out of the boot.’ As Basta was about to grab Meggie, Elinor pushed herself between them. ‘There’s nothing dangerous in it,’ she said crossly. ‘Just what we came here to hand over.’

By way of answer, Basta pulled the dogs aside, pulling so harshly on their leashes that they yelped out loud.

‘Meggie, listen to me!’ whispered Elinor, as they left the car and followed Basta down a steep pathway leading to the lighted

windows. 'Don't hand over the book until they let us see your father, understand?'

Meggie nodded, clutching the plastic bag firmly to her chest. How stupid did Elinor think she was? On the other hand, how was she going to hang on to the book if Basta decided to take it away from her? She preferred not to follow this line of thinking through to its conclusion.

It was a hot, sultry night. The sky above the black hills was sprinkled with stars. The path down which Basta was leading them was stony, and so dark that Meggie could hardly see her own feet, but whenever she stumbled there was a hand to catch her. The hand belonged either to Elinor, walking beside her, or to Dustfinger, who was following as silently as if he were her shadow. Gwin was still in his rucksack, and Basta's dogs kept raising their noses and sniffing, as if they had picked up the sharp scent of the marten.

Slowly, they came closer to the lighted windows. Meggie saw old houses of grey, rough-hewn stone, with a pale church tower rising above the rooftops. Many of the houses looked empty as they passed, going down alleys so narrow that Meggie felt they could close in on her. Some of the houses had no roofs, others were little more than a couple of walls partly fallen in. It was dark in Capricorn's village. Only a few lamps were on in the streets, hanging from masonry arches above the alleyways. At last they reached a small square. The church with the tower they had seen from a distance stood on one side of the square, and not far away, divided from it by a narrow passage, there was a large, two-storey house which did not look at all derelict. This square was better lit than the rest of the village, with four lanterns casting menacing shadows on the paving stones. Basta led them straight to the big house, where more light showed behind three windows on the upper floor. Was Mo in there? Meggie listened to herself as if she could find the answer there, but all her heart would tell her was a tale of fear. Fear and grief.



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14

A Mission Accomplished

‘The reason there’s no use looking,’ said Mr Beaver, ‘is that we know already where he’s gone!’ Everyone stared in amazement.

‘Don’t you understand?’ said Mr Beaver. ‘He’s gone to her, to the White Witch. He has betrayed us all.’

**C.S. Lewis,
*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe***

Hundreds of times since Dustfinger had first told her about him, Meggie had tried to picture Capricorn’s face. She’d thought about it on the way to Elinor’s house when Mo was sitting beside her in the van, and in the huge bed there, and finally on the drive here. Hundreds of times? No, she had tried to imagine it thousands of times, drawing on her ideas of all the villains she had ever read about in books: Captain Hook, crooked-nosed and thin; Long John Silver, a false smile always on his lips; Injun Joe, who had haunted so many of her bad dreams with his knife and his greasy black hair ... But Capricorn looked quite different. Meggie soon gave up counting the doors they passed before Basta finally stopped outside one. But she did count the black-clad men. Four of them were standing in the corridors, looking bored. Each man had a shotgun propped against the whitewashed wall beside him. Dustfinger had been right: in their close-fitting black suits they really did look like rooks. Only Basta wore a snow-white shirt,

just as Dustfinger had said, with a red flower in the buttonhole of his jacket, a red flower like a warning.

Capricorn's dressing gown was red too. He was seated in an armchair when Basta entered the room with the three new arrivals, and a woman was kneeling in front of him cutting his toenails. The chair seemed too small for him. Capricorn was a tall man, and gaunt, as if the skin had been stretched too tight over his bones. His skin was pale as parchment, his hair cut short and bristly. Meggie couldn't have said if it was grey or very fair.

He raised his head when Basta opened the door. His eyes were almost as pale as the rest of him, as if the colour had drained out of them, but bright as silver coins. The woman at his feet glanced up when they came in, then bent over to resume her work.

'Excuse me, but the visitors we were expecting have arrived,' said Basta. 'I thought you might want to speak to them at once.'

Capricorn leaned back in his chair and cast a brief glance at Dustfinger. Then his expressionless eyes moved to Meggie. She was clutching the plastic bag containing the book to her chest, her arms firmly wrapped around it. Capricorn stared at the bag as if he knew what was in it. He made a sign to the woman at his feet. Reluctantly, she straightened up, smoothed down her black dress, and glared at Elinor and Meggie. She looked like an old magpie, with her grey hair scraped back and a pointed nose that didn't seem to fit her small, wrinkled face. Nodding to Capricorn, she left the room.

It was a large room, only sparsely furnished: a long table with eight chairs, a cupboard and a heavy sideboard. There were no lamps in the room, only candles, dozens of them in heavy silver candlesticks. It seemed to Meggie that they filled the room with shadows rather than light.

'Where is it?' asked Capricorn. When he scraped back his chair Meggie flinched involuntarily. 'Don't tell me you've only

brought the girl this time.’ His voice was more impressive than his face. It was dark and heavy, and the moment she heard him speak Meggie hated it.

‘She’s got it with her. In that bag,’ replied Dustfinger before Meggie could say so herself. His eyes wandered restlessly from candle to candle as he spoke, as if only their dancing flames interested him. ‘Her father really didn’t know he had the wrong book. This woman who says she’s a friend of his,’ added Dustfinger, pointing to Elinor, ‘changed the books round without telling him. She’s a real bookworm. I think she lives on print. Her whole house is full of books – looks as if she likes them better than human company.’ The words came spilling out of Dustfinger’s mouth as if he wanted to be rid of them. ‘I didn’t like her from the first, but you know our friend Silvertongue. He always thinks the best of everyone. He’d trust the Devil himself if Old Nick gave him a friendly smile.’

Meggie looked at Elinor. She was standing there as if tongue-tied. Anyone could see she had a guilty conscience.

Capricorn merely nodded at Dustfinger’s explanations. He tightened the belt of his dressing gown, clasped his hands behind his back, and came slowly over to Meggie. She did her best not to flinch, to look firmly and undaunted into those colourless eyes, but fear constricted her throat. What a coward she was after all! She tried to think of some hero out of one of her books, someone whose skin she could slip into, to make her feel stronger, bigger, braver. Why could she remember nothing but stories of frightened people when Capricorn looked at her? She usually found it so easy to escape somewhere else, to get right inside the minds of people and animals who existed only on paper, so why not now? Because she was afraid. ‘Because fear kills everything,’ Mo had once told her. ‘Your mind, your heart, your imagination.’

Mo ... where was he? Meggie bit her lip to stop herself shaking, but she knew the fear showed in her eyes, and she knew that Capricorn saw it. She wished she had a heart of ice

and a clever smile, not the trembling lips of a child whose father had been stolen away.

Now Capricorn was very close to her. He scrutinised her. No one had ever looked at her like that. She felt like a fly stuck to a flypaper just waiting to die.

‘How old is she?’ Capricorn looked at Dustfinger as if he didn’t trust Meggie to know the answer herself.

‘Twelve!’ she said in a loud voice. It wasn’t easy to speak with her lips quivering so hard. ‘I’m twelve. And I want to know where my father is.’

Capricorn acted as if he hadn’t heard the last sentence. ‘Twelve?’ he repeated in the dark voice that weighed so heavily on Meggie’s ears, ‘Three or four more years and she’ll be a pretty little thing, useful to have around the place. We’ll have to feed her up a bit, though.’ He felt her arm with his long fingers. He wore gold rings on them, three on each hand. Meggie tried to pull away, but Capricorn was gripping her tightly as his pale eyes examined her. Just as he might have looked at a fish. A poor little fish wriggling on a hook.

‘Let the girl go!’ For the first time Meggie was glad Elinor’s voice could sound so sharp. And Capricorn actually did let go of her arm.

Elinor stepped up behind Meggie and put her hands protectively on her shoulders. ‘I don’t know what’s going on here,’ she snapped at Capricorn. ‘I don’t know who you are, or what you and all these men with guns are doing in this God-forsaken village, and I don’t want to know either. I’m here to see that this girl gets her father back. We’ll leave you the book you’re so keen to have – although that’s enough to give me heart-ache, but you’ll get it as soon as Meggie’s father is safe in my car. And if for any reason he wants to stay here we’d like to hear it from his own lips.’

Capricorn turned his back to her without a word. ‘Why did you bring this woman?’ he asked Dustfinger. ‘Bring the girl and

the book, I said. Why would I want the woman?’

Meggie looked at Dustfinger.

The girl and the book. The words kept repeating inside her head, like an echo. *The girl and the book, I said.* Meggie tried to look Dustfinger in the eye, but he avoided her gaze as if it would burn him. It hurt to feel so stupid. So terribly, terribly stupid.

Dustfinger perched on the edge of the table and pinched out one of the candles, gently and slowly as if waiting for the pain, the sharp little stab of the candle flame. ‘I’ve told Basta already: our dear friend Elinor couldn’t be persuaded to stay behind,’ he said. ‘She didn’t want to let the girl go with me alone, and she was very reluctant to give up the book.’

‘And wasn’t I right?’ Elinor’s voice rose to such a pitch that Meggie jumped. ‘Listen to him, Meggie, listen to that fork-tongued matchstick-eater! I ought to have called the police when he turned up again. He came back for the book; that was the only reason.’

And for me, thought Meggie. The girl and the book.

Dustfinger pretended to be preoccupied with pulling a loose thread from his coat-sleeve. But his hands, usually so skilful, were shaking.

‘And as for you!’ said Elinor, jabbing Capricorn in the chest with her forefinger. Basta took a step forward, but Capricorn waved him away. ‘I’ve had a lot of experience with books. I myself have had a number of books stolen from me, and I can’t claim that all the books on my shelves got there exactly as they should have done – perhaps you know the saying that all book collectors are vultures and hunters? But you really seem to be the craziest of us all. I’m surprised I’ve never heard of you before. Where’s your collection?’ She looked enquiringly round the big room. ‘I don’t see a single book.’

Capricorn put his hands in his dressing-gown pockets and signed to Basta. Before Meggie knew what was happening,

Basta had snatched the plastic bag from her hands. He opened it, peered inside suspiciously as if he thought it could contain a snake or something else that might bite, then reached in and brought out the book.

Capricorn took it from him. Meggie couldn't see on his face any of the tenderness with which Elinor and Mo looked at books. No, there was nothing but dislike on Capricorn's face – dislike and relief. That was all.

'These two know nothing?' Capricorn opened the book, leafed through it, then closed it again. It was the right book. Meggie could tell from his face. It was exactly the book he had been looking for.

'No, they know nothing. Even the girl doesn't know.' Dustfinger was looking out of the window very intently, as if there were more to be seen there than the pitch dark. 'Her father hasn't told her, so why should I?'

Capricorn nodded. 'Take these two round behind the house,' he told Basta, who was still standing there holding the empty bag.

'What do you mean?' Elinor began, but Basta was already hauling her and Meggie away.

'It means we're going to shut you two pretty birds in one of our cages overnight,' said Basta, prodding them roughly in the back with his shotgun.

'Where's my father?' shouted Meggie. Her own voice was shrill in her ears. 'You've got the book now! What more do you want of him?'

Capricorn strolled over to the candle that Dustfinger had pinched out, passed his forefinger over the wick and looked at the soot on his fingertip. 'What do I want of your father?' he said, without turning to look at Meggie. 'I want to keep him here, what else? You don't seem to know about his extraordinary talent. Up to now he's been unwilling to use it in my service, hard as Basta has tried to persuade him. But now

Dustfinger has brought you here he'll do anything I want. I'm confident of that.'

Meggie tried to push Basta's hands away when he reached for her, but he took her by the back of the head like a chicken whose neck he was going to wring. Elinor tried coming to her aid, but he casually pointed the shotgun at her chest and forced Meggie over to the door.

When Meggie turned round again she saw Dustfinger still leaning against the big table. He was watching her, but this time he wasn't smiling. Forgive me, his eyes seemed to say. I had to do it. I can explain everything! But Meggie didn't want to know, and she certainly wasn't about to forgive him. 'I hope you drop dead!' she screamed as Basta hauled her out of the room. 'I hope you burn to death! I hope you suffocate in your own smoke!'

Basta laughed as he closed the door. 'Just listen to this little wildcat!' he said. 'I think I'll have to watch my step with you around!'



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15

Good Luck and Bad Luck

It was the middle of the night, and Bingo couldn't sleep. The ground was hard, but he was used to that ... His blanket was dirty and smelled disgusting, but he was used to that too. A tune kept going through his head, and he couldn't get it out of his mind. It was the Wendels' victory song.

Michael de Larrabeiti,
The Borribles Go for Broke

The cages, as Basta had called them, kept ready by Capricorn for unwelcome guests were behind the church, in a paved area where rubbish containers stood next to mountains of building rubble. There was a slight smell of petrol in the air, and even the glow-worms whirling aimlessly through the night didn't seem to know what had brought them to this place. A row of tumbledown houses stood behind the bins and the rubble. The windows were just holes in the grey walls, and a couple of rotten shutters hung from their hinges at such an angle they looked as if a sudden gust of wind would blow them right off. Only the doors on the ground floor had obviously been given a fresh coat of paint fairly recently, in a dull brown shade with numbers painted on them clumsily, as if by a child, one for each door. As far as Meggie could see in the dark the last door had a number 7 on it. Basta propelled her and Elinor towards number 4. For a moment Meggie was relieved that he

hadn't really meant a cage, although the door in the blank wall looked anything but inviting.

'This is ridiculous!' said Elinor furiously, as Basta unlocked and unbolted the door. He had brought reinforcements with him from the house in the form of a skinny lad who wore the same black uniform as the grown men in Capricorn's village, and who obviously liked to menace Elinor by pointing his gun at her whenever she opened her mouth. But that didn't keep her quiet for long.

'What do you think you're playing at?' she said angrily, without taking her eyes off the muzzle of the gun. 'I've heard that these mountains were always a paradise for robbers, but for heaven's sake, we're living in the twenty-first century! These days people don't go pushing visitors around at gunpoint – certainly not a youngster like him.'

'As far as I'm aware people in this fine century of yours still do exactly as they always did,' replied Basta. 'And that youngster is just the right age to be apprenticed to us. I was even younger when I joined.' He pushed the door open. The darkness inside was blacker than night itself. Basta shoved first Meggie, then Elinor in, and slammed the door behind them.

Meggie heard the key turn in the lock, then Basta saying something which made the boy laugh, and the sound of their footsteps retreating. She reached her hands out until her fingertips touched a wall. Her eyes were useless; she might as well have been blind, she couldn't even see where Elinor was. But she heard her muttering, letting off steam somewhere over to her left.

'Isn't there at least a bloody light switch somewhere in this hole? Oh, to hell with it, I feel as if I've fallen into some farfetched adventure story where the villains wear black eye-patches and throw knives. Damn, damn, damn!' Meggie had already noticed that Elinor swore a lot, and the more upset she was the worse her language became.

‘Elinor?’ The voice came from somewhere in the darkness, and that one word expressed delight, horror and surprise.

Meggie spun round so suddenly she almost fell over her own feet. ‘Mo?’

‘Oh no! Meggie, not you too! How did you get here?’

‘Mo!’ Meggie stumbled through the darkness towards Mo’s voice. A hand took her arm and fingers felt her face.

‘Ah, at last!’ A naked electric light bulb hanging from the ceiling came on, and Elinor, looking pleased with herself, took her finger off a dusty switch. ‘Electric light is a wonderful invention!’ she said. ‘That at least is an improvement on past centuries, don’t you agree?’

‘What are you two doing here, Elinor?’ demanded Mo, holding Meggie very close. ‘I trusted you to look after her at least as well as your books! How could you let them bring her here?’

‘How could I *let* them?’ Elinor’s indignant voice almost cracked. ‘I never asked to baby-sit your daughter! I know how to look after books, but children are something else, dammit! And she was worried about you – wanted to go looking for you. So what does stupid Elinor do instead of staying comfortably at home? I mean, I couldn’t let the child go off on her own, I told myself. And what do I get for my noble conduct? Insults, a gun held to my chest, and now I’m here in this hole with you carrying on at me too!’

‘All right, all right!’ Mo held Meggie at arm’s length and looked her up and down.

‘I’m fine, Mo!’ said Meggie, although her voice shook just a little. ‘Honestly.’

Mo nodded and glanced at Elinor. ‘You brought Capricorn the book?’

‘Of course! You’d have given it to him yourself if I hadn’t ...’ said Elinor, going red and looking down at her dusty shoes.

‘If you hadn’t swapped them round,’ Meggie ended her sentence for her. She reached for Mo’s hand and held it very tightly. She couldn’t believe he was back with her, apparently perfectly all right except for the scratch on his forehead, almost hidden by his dark hair. ‘Did they hit you?’ She felt the dried blood anxiously with her forefinger.

Mo had to smile, although he couldn’t have been feeling much like it. ‘That’s nothing. I’m fine too. Don’t worry.’

Meggie didn’t think that was really much of an answer, but she asked no more questions.

‘So how did you come here?’ asked Mo. ‘Did Capricorn send his men back again?’

Elinor shook her head. ‘No need for that,’ she said bitterly. ‘Your slimy-tongued friend fixed it. A nice kind of snake you brought to my house, I must say. First he gives you away, then he serves up the book and your daughter to this man Capricorn. “Bring the girl and the book.” We heard Capricorn say so himself. That was our little matchstick-eater’s mission, and he carried it out to his master’s complete satisfaction.’

Meggie put Mo’s arm round her shoulders and buried her face against him.

‘The girl and the book?’ Mo held Meggie close again. ‘Of course. Now Capricorn can be sure I’ll do what he wants.’ He turned round and went over to the pile of straw lying on the floor in a corner of the room. Sighing, he sat down on it, leaned his back against the wall, and closed his eyes for a moment. ‘Well, now we’re quits, Dustfinger and I,’ he said. ‘Although I wonder how Capricorn is going to pay him for his treachery. Because what Dustfinger wants is something Capricorn can’t give him.’

‘Quits? What do you mean?’ Meggie sat down beside him. ‘And what are *you* supposed to do for Capricorn? What does he want you for, Mo?’ The straw was damp, not a good place to sleep, but still better than the bare stone floor.

Mo said nothing for what seemed an eternity. He stared at the bare walls, the locked door, the dirty floor.

‘I think it’s time I told you the whole story,’ he said at last. ‘Although I would rather not have had to tell you in a grim place like this, and not until you’re a little older.’

‘Mo, I’m twelve!’ Why do grown-ups think it’s easier for children to bear secrets than the truth? Don’t they know about the horror stories we imagine to explain the secrets?

‘Sit down, Elinor,’ said Mo, making space. ‘It’s quite a long story.’

Elinor sighed, and sat down unceremoniously on the damp straw. ‘This can’t be happening!’ she murmured. ‘This really *can’t* be happening!’

‘That’s what I thought for nine years, Elinor,’ said Mo. And then he began his story.

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Once Upon a Time

He held up the book then. 'I'm reading it to you for relax.'

'Has it got any sports in it?'

'Fencing. Fighting. Torture. Poison. True love. Hate. Revenge. Giants. Hunters. Bad men. Good men. Beautifullest ladies. Snakes. Spiders ... Pain. Death. Brave men. Cowardly men. Strongest men. Chases. Escapes. Lies. Truths. Passion. Miracles.'

'Sounds okay,' I said, and I kind of closed my eyes.

William Goldman,
The Princess Bride

You were just three years old, Meggie,' Mo began. 'I remember how we celebrated your birthday. We gave you a picture book – you know, the one about the sea-serpent with toothache winding itself round the lighthouse ...'

Meggie nodded. It was still in her book-box – Mo had twice given it a new dress. 'We?' she asked.

'Your mother and I ...' Mo picked some straw off his trousers. 'I could never pass by a bookshop. The house where we lived was very small – we called it our shoebox, our mouse-hole, we had all sorts of names for it – and that very day I'd bought yet another crate full of books from a second-hand bookseller.'

Elinor would have liked some of them,’ he added, glancing at her and smiling. ‘Capricorn’s book was there too.’

‘You mean it belonged to him?’ Meggie looked at Mo in surprise, but he shook his head.

‘No, but ... well, let’s take it all in order. Your mother sighed when she saw all those new books and asked where we were going to put them, but then of course she helped me to unpack the crate. I always used to read aloud to her in the evenings—’

‘You? *You* read aloud?’

‘Yes, every evening. Your mother enjoyed it. That evening she chose *Inkheart*. She always did like tales of adventure – stories full of brightness and darkness. She could tell you the names of all King Arthur’s knights, and she knew everything about Beowulf and Grendel, the ancient gods and the not-quite-so ancient heroes. She liked pirate stories too, but most of all she loved books which had at least a knight or a dragon or a fairy in them. She was always on the dragon’s side, by the way. There didn’t seem to be any of them in *Inkheart*, but there was any amount of brightness and darkness, fairies and brownies. Your mother liked brownies as well: hobgoblins, bugaboos, the Fenoderee, the *folletti* with their butterfly wings, she knew them all. So we gave you a pile of picture books, sat down on the rug beside you, and I began to read.’

Meggie leaned her head against Mo’s shoulder and stared at the blank wall. She saw herself against its dirty white background as she had looked in old photos: small, with plump legs, very fair hair (it had darkened a little since then), her little fingers turning the pages of big picture books.

‘We enjoyed the story,’ her father went on. ‘It was exciting, well written, and full of all sorts of amazing creatures. Your mother loved a book to lead her into an unknown land, and the world into which *Inkheart* led her was exactly what she liked. Sometimes the story took a very dark turn, and whenever the suspense got too much, your mother put a finger to her lips,

and I read more quietly, although we were sure you were too busy with your own books to listen to a sinister story which you wouldn't have understood anyway. I remember it as if it were yesterday; night had fallen long ago. It was autumn, with draughts coming in through the windows. We had lit a fire – there was no central heating in our shoebox of a house, but it had a stove in every room – and I began reading the seventh chapter. That's when it happened—'

Mo stopped. He stared ahead of him as if lost in his own thoughts.

'What?' whispered Meggie. 'What happened, Mo?'

Her father looked at her. 'They came out,' he said. 'There they were, all of a sudden, standing in the doorway to the corridor outside the room, as if they'd just come in from out of doors. There was a crackling noise when they turned to us – like someone slowly unfolding a piece of paper. I still had their names on my lips: Basta, Dustfinger, Capricorn. Basta was holding Dustfinger by the collar, as if he were shaking a puppy for doing something forbidden. Capricorn liked to wear red even then, but he was nine years younger and not quite as gaunt as he is today. He wore a sword, something I'd never seen at close quarters before. Basta had one hanging from his belt too, while Dustfinger ...' Here Mo shook his head. 'Well, of course the poor fellow had nothing but the horned marten whose tricks earned him a living. I don't think any of the three of them realised what had happened. Indeed, I didn't understand it myself until much later. My voice had brought them slipping out of their story like a bookmark forgotten by some reader between the pages. How could they understand what had happened? Basta pushed Dustfinger away so roughly that he fell down, then he tried to draw his sword, but his hands were white as paper and they obviously didn't yet have the strength for it. The sword slipped from his fingers and fell on the rug. Its blade looked as if there were dried blood on it, but perhaps it was only the reflection of the fire. Capricorn

stood there, looking round. He seemed dizzy; he was staggering on the spot like a dancing bear that has been made to turn round too often. And that may well have saved us, or so Dustfinger has always claimed. If Basta and his master had been in full command of their powers, they'd probably have killed us outright, but they hadn't fully arrived in this world yet, and I picked up the terrible sword lying on the rug among my books. It was heavy, much heavier than I'd expected. I must have looked absolutely ridiculous holding the thing. I probably clutched it like a vacuum cleaner or a walking stick, but when Capricorn staggered towards me and I held the blade between us he stopped. I stammered something, tried to explain what had happened, not that I understood it myself, but Capricorn just stared at me with those pale eyes, the colour of water; while Basta stood beside him with a hand on the hilt of his dagger. He seemed to be waiting for his master to tell him to cut all our throats.'

'And what about Dustfinger?' Elinor's voice sounded hoarse too.

'He was still where he'd fallen on the rug, sitting there as if paralysed, not making a sound. I didn't stop to think about Dustfinger. If you open a basket and see two snakes and a lizard crawl out, you're going to deal with the snakes first, right?'

'What about my mother?' Meggie could only whisper. She wasn't used to saying that word.

Mo looked at her. 'I couldn't see her anywhere. You were still kneeling among your books, staring wide-eyed at the strange men standing there with their heavy boots and their weapons. I was terrified for you, but to my relief both Basta and Capricorn ignored you. "That's enough talk," Capricorn said finally, as I became more and more entangled in my own words. "Never mind how we arrived in this miserable place, just send us back at once, you accursed magician, or Basta here will cut the talkative tongue out of your mouth." Which didn't sound exactly reassuring, and I'd read enough about those two in the

first chapters of the book to know that Capricorn meant what he said. I was wondering so desperately how to end the nightmare that I felt quite dizzy. I picked up the book. Perhaps if I read the same passage again, I thought ... I tried. I stumbled over the words while Capricorn glared at me and Basta drew the knife from his belt. Nothing happened. The two of them just stood there in my house, showing no sign of going back into their story. And suddenly I knew for certain that they meant to kill us. I put down the fatal book and picked up the sword I'd dropped on the rug. Basta tried to get to it before me, but I moved faster. I had to hold the wretched thing with both hands; I still remember how cold the hilt felt. Don't ask me how I did it, but I managed to drive Basta and Capricorn out into the passage. There were several breakages because I was brandishing the sword so clumsily. You began to cry, and I wanted to turn round and tell you it was all just a bad dream, but I was fully occupied keeping Basta's knife away from me with Capricorn's sword. So it's happened, I kept thinking, you're in the middle of a story exactly as you've always wanted, and it's horrible. Fear tastes quite different when you're not just reading about it, Meggie, and playing hero wasn't half as much fun as I'd expected. The two of them would certainly have killed me if they hadn't still been rather weak at the knees. Capricorn cursed me, his eyes almost bursting out of his head with fury. Basta swore and threatened, giving me a nasty cut on my upper arm, but then, suddenly, the front door was thrown open and they both disappeared into the night, still reeling like drunks. My hands were trembling so much I could scarcely manage to bolt the door. I leaned against it and listened for sounds outside, but all I heard was my own racing heart. Then I heard you crying in the living room, and remembered that there had been a third man. I staggered back, still holding the sword, and there stood Dustfinger in the middle of the room. He had no weapon, just the marten sitting on his shoulders. He flinched, face white as a sheet, when I came towards him. I must have been a terrible sight with the blood running down

my arm, and I was shaking all over, whether from fear or anger I couldn't have said. "Please," he kept whispering, "don't kill me! I'm nothing to do with those two. I'm only a juggler, just a harmless fire-eater. I can show you." And I said, "Yes, yes, all right, I know who you are, you're Dustfinger – I even know your name, you see." At which he cowered in awe before me – a magician, he thought, who seemed to know all about him and who had plucked him out of his world as easily as picking an apple off a tree. The marten scampered along his arm, jumped down on the carpet and ran towards you. You stopped crying and put out your hand. "Careful, he bites," said Dustfinger, shooing him away from you. I took no notice. I suddenly realised how quiet the room was, that was all. How quiet and how empty. I saw the book lying open on the carpet where I had dropped it, and I saw the cushion where your mother had been sitting. And she wasn't there. Where was she? I called her name again and again, I ran from room to room. But she had gone.'

Elinor was sitting bolt upright, staring at him in horror. 'For heaven's sake, Mortimer, what are you saying?' she cried. 'You told me she went away on some stupid adventure holiday and never came back!'

Mo leaned his head against the wall. 'I had to think up something, Elinor,' he said. 'I mean, I could hardly tell the truth, could I?'

Meggie stroked his arm where his shirt hid the long, pale scar. 'You always told me you'd cut your arm climbing through a broken window.'

'Yes, I know. The truth would have sounded too crazy, don't you think?'

Meggie nodded. He was right; she would just have thought it was another of his stories. 'So she never came back?' she whispered, although she knew the answer already.

‘No,’ replied Mo softly. ‘Basta, Capricorn and Dustfinger came out of the book and she went into it, along with our two cats who were curled up on her lap as usual while I read aloud. I expect some creature from here changed places with Gwin too, maybe a spider or a fly or a bird that happened to be flying round the house. Oh, I don’t know ...’ Mo fell silent.

Sometimes, when he had made up such a good story that Meggie thought it was true, he would suddenly smile and say, ‘You fell for that one, Meggie!’ Like the time on her seventh birthday when he told her he’d seen fairies among the crocuses in the garden. But the smile didn’t come this time.

‘I searched the whole house for your mother. No sign of her,’ he went on, ‘and when I came back to the living room, Dustfinger had vanished and so had his friend with the horns. But the sword was still there, and it felt so real that I decided not to doubt my sanity. I put you to bed – I think I told you your mother had already gone to sleep – and then I began reading *Inkheart* out loud again. I read the whole damn book until I was hoarse and the sun was rising, but nothing came out of it except a bat and a silken cloak, which I used later to line your book-box. I tried again and again during the days and nights that followed, until my eyes were burning and the letters danced drunkenly on the page. I didn’t eat, I didn’t sleep, I kept making up different stories for you to explain where your mother was, and I took good care you were never in the room with me when I was reading aloud, in case you disappeared too. I wasn’t worried about myself. Oddly enough, I had a feeling that the person reading the book ran no risk of slipping into its pages. I still don’t know whether I was right.’ Mo flicked a midge off his hand. ‘I read until I couldn’t hear my own voice any more,’ he went on, ‘but your mother didn’t come back, Meggie. Instead, a strange little man as transparent as if he were made of glass appeared in my living room on the fifth day, and the postman disappeared just as he was putting the mail into our letterbox. I found his bike out in the yard. After that I

knew that neither walls nor locked doors would keep you safe – you or anybody else. So I decided never to read aloud from a book again. Not from *Inkheart* or from any other book.’

‘What happened to the little glass man?’ asked Meggie.

Mo sighed. ‘He broke into pieces only a few days later when a heavy truck drove past the house. Obviously, very few creatures move easily from one world to another. We both know what fun it can be to get right into a book and live there for a while, but falling out of a story and suddenly finding yourself in this world doesn’t seem to be much fun at all. It broke Dustfinger’s heart.’

‘Oh, he has a heart, does he?’ enquired Elinor bitterly.

‘It would be better for him if he didn’t,’ replied Mo. ‘More than a week passed before he was back at my door again. It was night, of course. He prefers night to day. I was just packing. I’d decided it was safer to leave, since I didn’t want to be driving Basta and Capricorn out of my house at sword-point again. Dustfinger’s reappearance showed that I was right to feel anxious. It was well after midnight when he turned up, but I couldn’t sleep anyway.’ Mo stroked Meggie’s hair. ‘You weren’t sleeping well then either. You had bad dreams, however much I tried to keep them away with my stories. I was just packing the tools in my workshop when there was a knock on the front door, a very soft, almost furtive knock. Dustfinger emerged from the dark as suddenly as he did when he came to our house four days ago – heavens, was it really only four days? Well, when he came back that first time he looked as if it had been too long since he’d eaten. He was thin as a stray cat and his eyes were dull. “Send me back,” he begged, “send me back! This world will be the death of me. It’s too fast, too crowded, too noisy. If I don’t die of homesickness I shall starve to death. I don’t know how to make a living. I don’t know anything. I’m like a fish out of water,” he said. And he refused to believe that I couldn’t do it. He wanted to see the book and try for himself, even though he could scarcely read, but there was no way I

could let him have it. It would have been like giving away the very last part I still had of your mother. Luckily, I'd hidden it well. I let Dustfinger sleep on the sofa, and came down next morning to find him still searching the bookshelves. Over the next few years he kept on turning up, following us wherever we went, until I got sick and tired of it and made off with you in secret like a thief in the night. After that I saw no more of him for five years. Until four days ago.'

Meggie looked at him. 'You still feel sorry for him,' she said.

Mo was silent. At last, he said, 'Sometimes.'

Elinor's comment on that was a snort of contempt. 'You're even crazier than I thought,' she said. 'It's that idiot's fault we're in this hole, it's his fault if they cut our throats, and you still feel sorry for him?'

Mo shrugged his shoulders and looked up at the ceiling, where a few moths were fluttering around the naked light bulb. 'No doubt Capricorn has promised to take him back,' he said. 'Unlike me, he realised that Dustfinger would do anything in return for such a promise. All he wants is to go back to his own world. He doesn't even stop to ask if his story there has a happy ending!'

'Well, that's no different from real life,' remarked Elinor gloomily. 'You never know if things will turn out well. Just now our own story looks like coming to a bad end.'

Meggie sat with her arms clasped round her legs, her chin on her knees, staring at the dirty white walls. In her mind's eye she saw the 'N' in front of her, the 'N' with the horned marten sitting on it, and felt as if her mother were looking out from beyond the big capital letter, her mother as she was in the faded photograph under Mo's pillow. So she hadn't run away after all. Did she like it in that other world? Did she still remember her daughter? Or were Meggie and Mo just a fading picture for her too? Did she long to be back in her own world, just as Dustfinger did?

And did Capricorn long to be back in his own world as well? Was that what he wanted – for Mo to read him back again? What would happen when Capricorn realised that Mo simply couldn't do it? Meggie shuddered.

'It seems Capricorn has someone else to read aloud to him now,' Mo went on, as if he had guessed her thoughts. 'Basta told me about the man, probably to show me I'm not by any means indispensable. Apparently he's read several useful assistants for Capricorn out of a book already.'

'Oh yes? Then why does he want you?' Elinor sat up, rubbing her behind and groaning. 'I don't understand any of this. I just hope it's all a bad dream, the kind you wake up from with a stiff neck and a bad taste in your mouth.'

Meggie doubted whether Elinor really had any such hope. The damp straw felt too real, and so did the cold wall behind them. She leaned against Mo's shoulder again and closed her eyes. She was very sorry she had scarcely read a line of *Inkheart*. She knew nothing at all about the story into which her mother had disappeared. All she knew was Mo's *other* stories, about the fabulous exploits that had kept her mother away, tales of the adventures she was having in distant lands, of fearsome enemies who kept preventing her from coming home, and of a box she was filling for Meggie, putting something new and wonderful in it at every enchanted place she visited.

'Mo,' she asked, 'do you think she likes being in that story?'

It took Mo quite a long time to answer. 'She'd certainly like the fairies,' he said at last, 'although they're deceitful little things. And if I know her she'll be putting out bowls of milk for the brownies. Yes, I think she'd like that part of it ...'

'So ... so what wouldn't she like?' Meggie looked at him anxiously.

Mo hesitated. 'The evil in it,' he finally said. 'So many bad things happen in that book, and she never found out that it all

ends reasonably well – after all, I never finished reading her the whole story. That’s what she wouldn’t like.’

‘No, of course not,’ said Elinor. ‘But how do you know the story hasn’t changed anyway? After you read Capricorn and his friend out of it. And now we’re lumbered with them here.’

‘Yes,’ said Mo, ‘but they’re still in the book too. Believe me, I’ve read it often enough since they came out of it, and the story’s still about them: Dustfinger, Basta and Capricorn. Doesn’t that mean everything is still the way it was? Capricorn is still there, and we’re only up against a shadow of him in this world.’

‘He’s pretty frightening for a shadow,’ said Elinor.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ agreed Mo. ‘Perhaps things have changed there after all. Perhaps there’s another, much larger story behind the printed one, a story that changes just as our own world does. And the letters on the page tell us only as much as we’d see peering through a keyhole. Perhaps the story in the book is just the lid on a pan; it always stays the same, but underneath there’s a whole world that goes on developing and changing like our own.’

Elinor groaned. ‘For heaven’s sake, Mortimer!’ she said. ‘Stop it, do. You’re giving me a headache.’

‘It made my own head feel like bursting when I tried to make sense of it all,’ replied Mo gloomily.

After that they said nothing for quite a long time, all three of them absorbed in their own thoughts. Elinor was the first to speak again, although it sounded almost as if she were talking to herself. ‘Heavens above,’ she murmured, taking off her shoes. ‘To think of all the times I’ve wished I could slip right into one of my favourite books. But that’s the advantage of reading – you can shut the book whenever you want.’

Groaning, she wriggled her toes and began walking up and down. Meggie had to suppress a giggle. Elinor looked so funny

hobbling from the wall to the door and back again with her aching feet, back and forth like a clockwork toy.

‘Elinor, you’re driving me bonkers! Do sit down again,’ said Mo.

‘No, I won’t!’ she snapped back. ‘I’ll go mad myself if I stay sitting down.’

Mo made a face and put his arm round Meggie’s shoulders. ‘All right, let’s leave her to it!’ he whispered. ‘By the time she’s covered ten kilometres she’ll fall down exhausted. But you ought to get some sleep now. You can have my bed. It’s not as bad as it looks. If you close your eyes very tight you can imagine you’re Wilbur the pig sleeping comfortably in his sty ...’

‘Or Wart sleeping in the grass with the wild geese.’ Meggie couldn’t help yawning. How often she and Mo had played this game! ‘Which book can you think of? Which part have we forgotten? Oh yes, that one! It’s ages since I thought about that story ...!’ Wearily, she lay down on the prickly straw.

Mo pulled his sweater off over his head and covered her up with it. ‘You need a blanket all the same,’ he said. ‘Even if you’re a pig or a goose.’

‘But you’ll freeze.’

‘Nonsense.’

‘And where will you and Elinor sleep?’ Meggie yawned again. She hadn’t realised how tired she was.

Elinor was still pacing from wall to wall. ‘What’s all this about sleeping?’ she said. ‘We’re going to keep watch, of course.’

‘All right,’ murmured Meggie, burying her nose in Mo’s sweater. He’s back with me, she thought, as drowsiness weighed down her eyelids. Nothing else matters. And then she thought: Oh, if only I could read some more of that book! But

Inkheart was in Capricorn's hands – and she didn't want to think of him now, or she would never get to sleep. Never ...

Later, she didn't know how long she had slept. Perhaps her cold feet woke her, or the itchy straw under her head. Her watch said four o'clock. There was nothing in the windowless room to tell her whether it was night or day, but Meggie couldn't imagine that the night was over yet. Mo was sitting near the door with Elinor. They both looked tired and anxious, and they were talking in low voices.

'Yes, they still think I'm a magician,' Mo was saying. 'They gave me that ridiculous name – Silvertongue. And Capricorn is firmly convinced I can repeat the trick any time, with any book at all.'

'And ... and can you?' asked Elinor. 'You weren't telling us the whole story earlier, were you?'

Mo didn't answer for a long time. 'No,' he said at last. 'Because I don't want Meggie thinking I'm some kind of a magician too.'

'So you've – well, read things out of a book quite often?'

Mo nodded. 'I always liked reading aloud, even as a boy, and one day, when I was reading *Tom Sawyer* to a friend, a dead cat suddenly appeared on the carpet, lying there stiff as a board. I only noticed later that one of my soft toys had vanished. I think both our hearts missed a beat, and my friend and I swore to each other, sealing the oath with blood like Tom and Huck, that we'd never tell anyone about the cat. After that, of course, I kept trying again in secret, without any witnesses, but it never seemed to happen when I wanted. In fact, there didn't seem to be any rules at all, except that it only happened with stories I liked. Of course I kept everything that came out of books, except for the snozzcumber I got out of the book about the friendly giant. It stank too much. When Meggie was still very small, things sometimes came out of her picture books: a

feather, a tiny shoe. We put them in her book-box, without telling her where they came from, otherwise she'd never have picked up a book again for fear the giant serpent with toothache or some other alarming creature might appear! But I'd never, never managed to bring anything living out of a book, Elinor. Until that night.' Mo looked at the palms of his hands, as if seeing there all the things his voice had lured out of books. 'Why couldn't it have been some nice creature if it had to happen? Something like – oh, Babar the elephant. Meggie would have been enchanted.'

Yes, I certainly would, thought Meggie. She remembered the little shoe, and the feather as well. It had been emerald green, like the plumage of Dr Dolittle's parrot Polynesia.

'Well, it could have been worse.' Typical Elinor! As if it wasn't bad enough to be locked up in a tumbledown house far away from ordinary life, surrounded by black-clad men with faces like birds of prey and knives in their belts. But obviously Elinor really could imagine something worse. 'Suppose Long John Silver had suddenly appeared in your living room, striking out with his wooden crutch?' she whispered. 'I think I prefer this Capricorn after all. You know what? When we're home again – in my house, I mean – I'll give you a really nice book. *Winnie the Pooh*, for instance, or maybe *Where the Wild Things Are*. I really wouldn't mind one of those monsters. I'll sit you down in my most comfortable armchair, make you a coffee, and then you can read aloud. How about it?'

Mo laughed quietly, and for a moment his face didn't look quite so careworn. 'No, Elinor, I shall do no such thing. Although it sounds very tempting. But I swore never to read aloud again. Who knows who might disappear next time? And perhaps there's some unpleasant character we never noticed even in the Pooh books. Or suppose I read Pooh himself out of his book? What would he do here without his friends and the Thousand-Acre-Wood? His poor little heart would break, like Dustfinger's.'

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake!’ Elinor impatiently dismissed this idea. ‘How often do I have to tell you that fool *has* no heart? Very well, then. Let me ask you another question, because I’d very much like to know the answer.’ Elinor lowered her voice, and Meggie had to strain her ears to make out what she was saying. ‘Who was this Capricorn in his own story? The villain of the piece, I suppose, but can you tell me any more about him?’

Meggie would have liked to know more about Capricorn too, but Mo was suddenly not very forthcoming. All he would say was, ‘The less you know about him, the better.’ Then he fell silent. Elinor kept on at him for a while, but Mo evaded all her questions. He simply did not seem to want to talk about Capricorn. Meggie could see from his face that his thoughts were somewhere else entirely. At some point Elinor nodded off, curled up on the cold floor as if trying to keep herself warm with her own body. But Mo went on sitting there with his back against the wall.

As Meggie felt herself drift off to sleep again, Mo’s face stayed with her in her slumbers. It emerged in her dreams like a dark moon with figures leaping from its mouth, living creatures – fat, thin, large, small, they hopped out and ran away in a long line. A woman, scarcely more than a shadow, was dancing on the moon’s nose – and suddenly the moon smiled.



17

The Betrayer Betrayed

It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things blackened and changed ... He wanted ... to shove a marshmallow on a stick in the furnace, while the flapping pigeon-winged books died on the porch and lawn of the house. While the books went up in sparkling whirls, and blew away on a wind turned dark with burning.

Ray Bradbury,
Fahrenheit 451

Some time near daybreak the feeble light from the electric bulb that had helped them through the night flickered out. Mo and Elinor were asleep near the locked door, but Meggie lay in the dark with her eyes open, feeling fear ooze out of the cold walls. She listened to Elinor's breathing, and her father's, and more than anything wished for a candle – and a book to keep the fear away. It seemed to be everywhere, a malicious, disembodied creature that had just been waiting for the light to go out so that it could steal close to her in the darkness and take her in its cold arms. Meggie sat up, fought for breath, and crawled over to Mo on all fours. She curled up in a ball beside him the way she used to when she was little, and waited for the light of dawn to come in under the door.

With the light came two of Capricorn's men. Mo had only just sat up, wearily, and Elinor was rubbing her aching back and

muttering crossly when they heard the footsteps.

They weren't Basta's footsteps. One of the two men, a great tall beanpole, looked as if a giant had pressed his face flat with his thumb. The other was small and thin, with a goatee beard on his receding chin. He kept fiddling with his shotgun, and glowered unpleasantly at the three of them, as if he felt like shooting them on the spot.

'Come on, then. Get a move on!' he snapped as they stumbled out into the bright light of day, blinking. Meggie tried to remember whether his voice was one of those she had heard in Elinor's library, but she wasn't sure. Capricorn had many men.

It was a fine, warm morning. The sky arched blue and cloudless above Capricorn's village, and a couple of finches were twittering in a rose bush growing wild among the old houses, as if there were no danger in the world but a hungry cat or two. Mo took Meggie's arm as they stepped outside. Elinor had to get her shoes on first, and when the man with the goatee tried hauling her roughly out because she didn't move fast enough for him, she pushed his hands away and fired a volley of bad language at him. That simply made the two men laugh, whereupon Elinor tightened her lips and confined herself to hostile glances.

Capricorn's men were in a hurry. They led Mo, Meggie and Elinor back the way Basta had brought them the night before. The flat-faced man went ahead of them and the man with the goatee brought up the rear, shotgun at the ready. He dragged one leg as he walked, but nonetheless he kept urging them on, as if to prove that he could move faster than they could even though he limped.

Even by day Capricorn's village appeared curiously deserted, and not just because of the many empty houses, which looked even more dismal in the sunlight. There was hardly anyone to be seen in the narrow alleys, only a few of the Black Jackets, as Meggie had secretly baptised them, with skinny boys following

them like puppies. Meggie only twice saw a woman passing in a hurry. She could see no children playing or running after their mothers, only cats: black, white, ginger, tortoiseshell, tabby cats, lying in the warm sun on top of walls, in doorways, on lintels. It was deathly quiet among the houses of Capricorn's village, and everything that went on seemed to be done in secret. Only the men with the guns didn't hide. They hung around together in gateways and at the corners of buildings, leaning lovingly on their weapons as they talked. There were no flowers outside the houses, like the flowers Meggie had seen in the towns and villages all along the coast, instead roofs had fallen in and wild bushes were in bloom, growing out through glassless windows. Some were so heavy with scent that they made Meggie feel dizzy.

When they reached the square outside the church, Meggie thought the two men were taking them to Capricorn's house again, but they passed it on their left and went straight to the big church door. The tower of the church looked as if wind and weather had been wearing the masonry down for a dangerously long time. A rusty bell hung under the pointed roof, and scarcely a metre lower down a seed carried by the wind had grown into a stunted tree that now clung to the sand-coloured stone.

There were eyes painted on the church door, narrow red eyes, and ugly stone demons the height of a man stood on either side of the entrance, their teeth bared like savage dogs.

'Welcome to the Devil's house!' said the bearded man with a mocking bow before opening the heavy door.

'Don't do that, Cockerell!' the flat-faced man snapped at him, spitting three times on the dusty paving stones at his feet. 'It's bad luck.'

The man with the goatee just laughed and patted the fat belly of one of the stone figures. 'Oh, come on, Flatnose. You're

almost as bad as Basta. Carry on like this and you'll be hanging a stinking rabbit's foot round your own neck too.'

'I like to be on the safe side,' growled Flatnose. 'You hear strange tales.'

'Yes, and who made them up? We did, you fool.'

'Some of them date from before our time.'

'Whatever happens,' Mo whispered to Elinor and Meggie as the two men argued, 'leave the talking to me. A sharp tongue can be dangerous here, believe me. Basta is quick to draw his knife, and he'll use it too.'

'Basta's not the only one here with a knife, Silvertongue!' said Cockerell, pushing Mo into the dark church. Meggie hurried after him.

It was dim and chilly inside the church. The morning light made its way in only through a few windows, painting pale patches high up on the walls and columns. No doubt these had once been grey like the flagstone floor, but now there was only one colour in Capricorn's church. Everything was red. The walls, the columns, even the ceiling, were vermilion, the colour of raw meat or dried blood. For a moment, Meggie felt as if she had stepped into the belly of some monster.

In a corner near the entrance stood the statue of an angel. A wing was broken off, and the black jacket of one of Capricorn's men had been hung over the other wing while someone had stuck a pair of fancy dress horns on its head, the kind children wear to parties. Its halo was still there between them. The angel had probably once stood on the stone plinth in front of the first column, now it had had to give way to another statue, whose gaunt, waxen face seemed to look down at Meggie with a supercilious expression. Whoever had carved it wasn't very good at his trade; its features were painted like the face of a plastic doll, with oddly red lips and blue eyes that held none of the cold detachment the colourless eyes of the real Capricorn turned on the world. But, to make up for that, the statue was at

least twice the height of its living model, and all who passed it had to tilt their head back to look up at its pale face.

‘Is that allowed, Mo?’ asked Meggie quietly. ‘Putting up a statue of yourself in a church?’

‘Oh, it’s a very old custom!’ Elinor whispered back. ‘Statues in churches aren’t often the statues of saints. Most saints couldn’t have paid the sculptor. In the cathedral of—’

Cockerell prodded her in the back so roughly that she stumbled forward. ‘Get a move on!’ he growled. ‘And bow next time you pass him, understand?’

‘Bow!’ Elinor was going to stand her ground, but Mo quickly made her go on. ‘Who on earth can take this circus seriously?’ she said crossly.

‘If you don’t keep your mouth shut,’ Mo told her in a whisper, ‘you’ll soon find out how seriously they take everything here.’

Elinor looked at the scratch on his forehead, and said no more.

Capricorn’s church contained no pews of the kind Meggie had seen in other churches, just two long wooden tables with benches, one on each side of the nave. There were dirty plates on them, coffee-stained mugs, wooden boards where cheese rinds lay, knives, sausages, empty bread baskets. Several women were busy clearing all this away. Without pausing in their work, they glanced up as Cockerell and Flatnose passed with their three captives. Meggie thought they looked like birds hunching their heads down beneath their wings in case someone might strike them off.

Not only were the pews missing from Capricorn’s church, but the altar had gone too. In its place there now stood a massive chair, upholstered in red and with designs carved thickly into its legs and arms. Leading up to it were four shallow steps, carpeted in black. Meggie wasn’t sure why she counted them. And crouching on the top step just a few paces away from the chair, his sandy hair ruffled as usual, was Dustfinger,

apparently lost in thought as he let Gwin run up and down his outstretched arm.

As Meggie came down the nave with Mo and Elinor, Dustfinger raised his head briefly. Gwin climbed up to his shoulder, baring his tiny teeth, sharp as splinters of glass, as if he had recognised the hatred in Meggie's eyes as they rested on his master. Now she knew why the marten had horns, and why his twin was shown on the page of a book. She understood it all: why Dustfinger thought the world too fast and too noisy, why he didn't understand cars and often looked as if he were somewhere else entirely. But she felt none of the sympathy Mo had shown for him. His scarred face only reminded her of the lies he had told to lure her out to him, like the Pied Piper in the story. He had played with her as he played with fire, with his brightly coloured juggler's balls: come along, Meggie; this way, Meggie; trust me, Meggie. She felt like running up the steps and striking his lying mouth.

Dustfinger must have guessed her thoughts, and was avoiding her eyes. Not looking at Mo and Elinor either, he put a hand in his trouser pocket and brought out a matchbox. As if unconscious of what he was doing, he took out a match, lit it, and gazed at the flame, lost in thought as he passed a finger through it almost caressingly until it singed his fingertip.

Meggie looked away. She didn't want to see him; she wanted to forget he was there. To her left, at the foot of the steps, stood two drum-shaped iron braziers, rusty brown, with wood heaped up in them: pale, freshly cut firewood, log upon log. Meggie was just wondering what the wood was for when more steps echoed through the church. Basta was walking down the nave with a petrol can in his hand. Reluctantly, Cockerell and Flatnose gave way as he pushed past them.

'Ah, so Dustfinger's playing with his best friend again,' he sneered as he climbed the shallow steps. Dustfinger lowered the matchstick and straightened up. 'Here you are,' said Basta,

putting the petrol can down at his feet. 'Another toy for you. Light us a fire; that's what you like best.'

Dustfinger threw away the spent match and lit another. 'So how about you?' he asked quietly, raising the burning match to Basta's face. 'Still afraid of fire, are you?'

Basta knocked the match out of his hand.

'Oh, you shouldn't do that!' said Dustfinger. 'It means bad luck. You know how quickly fire takes offence.'

For a moment Meggie thought Basta was going to hit him, and she wasn't the only one. All eyes were turned on the two men. But something seemed to protect Dustfinger. Perhaps it really was the fire.

'You're lucky I've only just cleaned my knife!' spat Basta. 'One more trick like that, though, and I'll carve a few nice new patterns on your ugly face. And make myself a fur collar out of your marten.'

Gwin uttered a soft, threatening snarl, and wrapped himself around Dustfinger's neck. Dustfinger bent, picked up the spent matches, and put them back in the matchbox. 'Yes, I'm sure you'd enjoy that,' he said, still without looking at Basta. 'But why would I want to light a fire just now, I wonder?'

'Never you mind that, just do it. Then the rest of us can keep it fed. But make sure it's a large, hungry blaze, not one of the tame little fires you like to play with.'

Dustfinger picked up the petrol can and slowly climbed down the steps. He was standing beside the rusty braziers when the church door opened for the second time.

Meggie turned at the sound of the heavy wooden door creaking, and saw Capricorn appear between the red columns. He glanced at his statue, as if to make sure it still gave a flattering enough image of him, then strode quickly down the nave. He was wearing a suit as red as the church walls. Only the shirt beneath it was black, and he had a black feather in his

buttonhole. A good half-dozen of his men were following him, like crows following a peacock. Their steps seemed to echo all the way up to the ceiling. Meggie reached for Mo's hand.

'Ah, so our guests are here already,' said Capricorn, stopping in front of them. 'Did you sleep well, Silvertongue?' He had curiously soft, curving, almost feminine lips, and as he spoke he kept running his little finger along them as if to retrace them. They were as bloodless as the rest of his face. 'Wasn't it kind of me to reunite you with your little girl last night? At first I meant it to be a surprise present for you today, but then I thought: Capricorn, you really owe that child something for bringing you what you've wanted so long, and of her own free will too.'

He was holding *Inkheart*. Meggie saw Mo's gaze linger on the book. Capricorn was a tall man, but Mo stood a few centimetres taller, which obviously displeased Capricorn. He stood very upright, as if that would make up for the difference.

'Let Elinor take my daughter home with her,' said Mo. 'Let them go and I'll try to read you back again. I'll read you anything you like, but let the two of them go first.'

What was he talking about? Meggie looked at him in horror. 'No!' she said. 'No, Mo, I don't want to go away.' But no one was paying any attention to her.

'Let them go?' Capricorn turned to his men. 'Hear that? Why would I do such a crazy thing now they're here?' The men laughed. But Capricorn turned to Mo again. 'You know as well as I do that from now on you'll do whatever I want,' he said. 'Now that she's here, I'm sure you won't go on denying us a demonstration of your skill.'

Mo squeezed Meggie's hand so hard her fingers hurt.

'And as for this book,' said Capricorn, looking at *Inkheart* with as much dislike as if it had bitten his pale fingers, 'this extremely tedious, stupid and extraordinarily long-winded book, I can assure you I have no intention of ever again letting

myself be spellbound by its story. All those troublesome creatures, those fluttering fairies with their twittering voices, the swarming, scrabbling stupid beasts everywhere, the smell of fur and dung. All through this book you kept falling over bandy-legged brownies in the market-place, and when you went hunting the giants scared the game away with their huge feet. Talking trees, whispering pools – was there anything in that world that didn't have the power of speech? And then those endless muddy roads to the nearest town, if town it could be called – that pack of well-born, finely dressed princes in their castles, those stinking peasants, so poor there was nothing to be got out of them, and the vagabonds and beggars with vermin dropping from their hair – oh, how sick I was of them all.'

Capricorn made a sign, and one of his men brought in a large cardboard box. You could see from the way he carried it that it was very heavy. The man put it down on the grey flagstones in front of Capricorn with a sigh of relief. Capricorn handed Cockerell, who was standing beside him, the book that Mo had kept from him so long, and bent to open the box. It was full to the brim with books.

'It's been a great deal of trouble finding them all,' said Capricorn as he reached into the box and took out two books. 'They may look different, but the contents are the same. The fact that the story has been printed in several languages made the search even more difficult – a particularly useless feature of this world, all those different languages. It was simpler in our own world, wasn't it, Dustfinger?'

Dustfinger made no answer. He stood there holding the petrol can and staring at the box. Capricorn strolled over to him and threw the two books into one of the braziers.

'What are you doing?' Dustfinger tried to snatch them out, but Basta pushed him away.

'Those stay where they are,' he growled.

Dustfinger stepped back, holding the can behind his back, but Basta grabbed it from his hands. 'Why, it looks as if our fire-eater would rather let someone else light the fire today,' he mocked.

Dustfinger cast him a glance full of hatred. Face rigid, he watched Capricorn's men throw more and more books into the braziers. In the end there were over two dozen copies of *Inkheart* on the piles of firewood, their pages crumpled, their bindings wrenched apart like broken wings.

'You know what always got me down back in our old world, Dustfinger?' asked Capricorn as he took the petrol can from Basta's hand. 'The difficulty of lighting a fire. It wasn't any problem to you, of course – you could even talk to fire, very likely one of those grunting brownies taught you how – but it was a tedious business for the rest of us. The wood was always damp, or the wind blew down the chimney. I know you long for the good old days, you miss all your chirping, fluttering friends, but I don't shed a tear for any of that. This world is far better equipped than the one we had to be content with for so many long years.'

Dustfinger did not seem to hear a word of what Capricorn was saying. He just stared at the petrol and smelled its fumes as it was poured over the books. The pages sucked it up as greedily as if they were welcoming their own end.

'Where did they all come from?' he stammered. 'You always told me there was just one copy left – Silvertongue's.'

'Yes, yes, I told you all kinds of things.' Capricorn put his hand in his trouser pocket. 'You're such a gullible fellow, Dustfinger. It's fun to tell you lies. Your innocence always amazed me – after all, you lie very cleverly yourself. But you're too ready to believe what you want to believe, that's your trouble. Well, you can safely believe me now. These,' he said, tapping the petrol-soaked pile of books, 'these really are the last copies of our ink-black home. It's taken Basta and the others

years to track them all down in shabby lending libraries and second-hand bookshops.'

Dustfinger looked longingly at the books, as a man dying of thirst might look at the last glass of water in existence. 'But you can't burn them!' he stammered. 'You promised to send me back if I found you Silvertongue's book. That's why I told you where he was. That's why I brought you his daughter.'

Capricorn merely shrugged his shoulders and took the book from Cockerell's hands – the book with the green binding that Meggie and Elinor had been so eager to give him, the book for which he had made his men bring Mo all this way, the book for which Dustfinger had betrayed them all.

'I'd have promised to fetch you down the moon from the sky if that would have done me any good,' said Capricorn, looking bored as he flung the last copy of *Inkheart* on to the pile with its companions. 'I'm happy to make promises, especially promises I can't keep.' Then he took a lighter from his trouser pocket. Dustfinger was about to leap at him to strike it out of his hand, but Capricorn made a sign to Flatnose.

Flatnose was so tall and broad that beside him Dustfinger looked almost like a child, and indeed the man took hold of him as if he were a badly behaved little boy. Fur bristling, Gwin leaped off Dustfinger's shoulder. One of Capricorn's men kicked out as the marten shot past his legs, but Gwin got away and disappeared behind one of the red columns. The other men stood there laughing at Dustfinger's desperate attempts to free himself from Flatnose's iron grasp. Flatnose thought it greatly amusing to let Dustfinger get just close enough to the petrol-soaked books to touch the top volumes with his fingers.

Such cruelty made Meggie feel quite ill. Mo took a step forward as if to go to Dustfinger's aid, but Basta barred his way, a knife in his hand. Its blade, narrow and shiny, looked terribly sharp held against Mo's throat.

Elinor screamed, and directed a torrent of curses at Basta that Meggie had never even heard before, but she herself could not move. She just stood there, in numb and silent terror, staring at the blade against Mo's bare throat.

'Let me have one of them, Capricorn, just one!' Mo cried, and only then did Meggie realize that he had not been going to help Dustfinger but was thinking of the book. 'I promise never to read aloud a line of it that mentions your name.'

'You! Are you mad? You're the last man I'd give one to,' replied Capricorn. 'One day you might be unable to control your tongue after all, and I'd land back in that ridiculous story again. No thank you very much!'

'Nonsense!' cried Mo. 'I couldn't read you back into it even if I wanted to – how often do I have to tell you that? Ask Dustfinger. I've explained it to him a thousand times. I myself don't understand how or when these things happen. For heaven's sake, believe me!'

With a chilling smirk, Capricorn answered merely with a smile, 'I'm sorry, Silvertongue, but the fact is I don't believe anyone. You ought to know that by now. We're all liars when it serves our purpose.' And with those words he flicked the lighter and held its flame to one of the books. The petrol had made the pages almost transparent, like parchment, and they flared up at once. Even the stout cloth bindings caught light immediately, the linen turning black as the flames licked round it.

When the third book caught fire, Dustfinger kicked Flatnose's kneecap so hard that the man screamed with pain and let go of him. Nimble as his marten, Dustfinger wriggled out of those powerful arms and stumbled towards the braziers. Without hesitating, he reached into the flames, but the book he plucked out was already burning like a torch. Dustfinger dropped it on the flagstone floor and reached into the fire again, with his other hand this time, but by now Flatnose had already grasped

him by the collar and was shaking him so roughly that Dustfinger was gasping for air.

‘Look at the lunatic!’ sneered Basta as Dustfinger stared at his hands, his face distorted with pain. ‘Can anyone explain what he wants so much? Maybe those ugly brownie girls who thought him so wonderful when he juggled in the market-place? Or the filthy hovels where he lived with other vagabonds? They smelled even worse than the rucksack he carries that stinking marten around in.’

Capricorn’s men laughed as the books slowly crumpled into ashes. There was still a smell of petrol in the church, such an acrid smell that it made Meggie cough. Mo put a protective arm around her shoulders, as if Basta had threatened her rather than him. But who, thought Meggie, who could protect Mo?

Elinor was looking at his neck as anxiously as if she feared Basta’s knife might have left its mark there after all. ‘These fellows are out of their minds!’ she whispered. ‘You know what they say: when people start burning books they’ll soon burn human beings. Suppose we’re the next to find ourselves on a pyre?’

Basta seemed to hear what she was saying. He caught her eye, and with a twisted smile kissed the blade of his knife.

Elinor fell silent, as if she had swallowed her tongue.

Capricorn had taken a snow-white handkerchief from his pocket. He cleaned his fingers with it carefully, as if to wipe even the memory of *Inkheart* off his hands. ‘Well, that’s done at last,’ he remarked with a final nod at the smoking embers. Then, with a satisfied expression on his face, he climbed up to the chair that had replaced the altar. Capricorn sank into its red upholstery with a deep sigh.

‘Dustfinger, go to the kitchen and get Mortola to put something on your burns,’ he ordered in a commanding voice. ‘You’ll be no use for anything without the use of your hands.’

Dustfinger looked at Mo for a long time before obeying this order. Head bent, with unsteady steps, he walked past Capricorn's men. The way to the church porch seemed endless. For a moment, as Dustfinger opened the door, bright sunlight shone into the building. As it closed behind him, Meggie, Mo and Elinor were left with Capricorn and his men – and the reek of petrol and burnt paper.

‘And now let's come to you, Silvertongue!’ said Capricorn, stretching his legs. He was wearing black boots. He examined the gleaming leather with satisfaction, removing a scrap of charred paper from the toe of one boot. ‘Until now I, Basta and the unfortunate Dustfinger are the only evidence that you can conjure up extraordinary magic out of little black letters. You yourself don't seem to trust your gift, if we're to believe you – which, as I was saying just now, I don't. On the contrary, I think you are a master of your craft, and I can scarcely wait for you to give us another taste of your skill at long last. Cockerell!’ His voice sounded irritated. ‘Where's the reader? Didn't I tell you to bring him?’

Cockerell stroked his beard nervously. ‘He was still busy choosing books,’ he stammered. ‘I'll fetch him right away.’ And with a hasty bow, he limped off.

Capricorn began drumming his fingers on the arms of his chair. ‘No doubt you've already heard that I had to resort to the services of another reader while you were hiding from me so successfully,’ he said to Mo. ‘I found him by chance five years ago, but he's useless. You only have to look at Flatnose's face.’ Flatnose lowered his head, embarrassed, when all eyes turned on him. ‘And Cockerell owes him his limp too. As for the girls he read out of his books for me, you should have seen them. It'd give a man nightmares just to see their faces. Finally, I had him read to me only when I felt like amusing myself with his monsters, and I actually found my men in this world of yours, just by recruiting them when they were still young. There's a lonely boy who likes to play with fire in almost every village.’

Smiling, he inspected his fingernails like a satisfied cat examining its claws. 'I've told the reader to find the right books for you. At least the poor fool does know his way around books – he lives in them like one of those pale worms that feed on paper.'

'And just what am I supposed to read out of his books for you?' Mo's voice sounded bitter. 'A few monsters, a couple of human horrors to suit the present company?' He nodded in Basta's direction.

'For heaven's sake, Mortimer, don't put ideas into his head!' whispered Elinor, with a nervous glance at Capricorn.

But Capricorn merely flicked some ash off his trousers and smiled. 'No, thank you, Silvertongue,' he said. 'I have enough men, and as for the monsters, well, perhaps we'll get around to them later. For the time being we're doing very well with Basta's trained dogs and the local snakes. They make excellent and deadly presents. No, Silvertongue, all I want today as a test of your skill is gold. I have such an appetite for money! My men do their best to squeeze all that can be squeezed out of this part of the country.' At these words from Capricorn, Basta lovingly stroked his knife. 'But it's never enough for all the wonderful things that can be bought in this infinitely wide world of yours. A world of so many pages, Silvertongue, so very many pages, and I want to write my name on every one of them.'

'In what kind of letters?' enquired Mo. 'Is Basta going to scratch them into the paper with his knife?'

'Oh, Basta can't write,' replied Capricorn calmly. 'None of my men can either read or write. I've forbidden them to learn. But I got one of my maidservants to teach *me* how to read. And when there's something to be written the reader does it. So you see, my dear Silvertongue, I can make my mark on your world.'

The church door opened as if Cockerell had just been waiting for this cue. The man he ushered in had his head hunched between his shoulders and looked neither right nor left as he

followed Cockerell. He was small and thin, and couldn't be any older than Mo, but his back was bent like an old man's, and his arms and legs moved awkwardly, as if he didn't quite know what to do with them. He kept nervously adjusting his glasses. The frame was held together over the bridge of his nose with sticky tape, as if it had often been broken. He was clutching a number of books to his chest with his left arm, as if they offered some protection from the stares turned on him from all sides and the sinister place to which he had been brought.

When the two men eventually reached the foot of the steps Cockerell dug an elbow into his companion's ribs, and the man bowed so hurriedly that two of the books fell to the floor. He was quick to snatch them up, and bowed to Capricorn a second time.

'We've been waiting for you, Darius!' said Capricorn. 'I trust you've found what I wanted.'

'Oh yes, yes!' stammered Darius, casting an almost reverent glance at Mo. 'Is that him?'

'Yes. Show him the books you've chosen.'

Darius nodded and bowed again, this time to Mo. 'These – these are all stories with treasure in them,' he stammered. 'Finding them wasn't as easy as I had expected,' he added, with the faintest note of reproach in his voice. 'After all, there aren't so many books in this village. And however often I ask no one brings me any more, or if they do the books are useless. But never mind that – here they are. I think you'll be happy with my choice, anyway.' He knelt down on the floor in front of Mo and began setting out the books side by side, so that Mo could read the titles.

The very first one alarmed Meggie. *Treasure Island*. She looked uneasily at Mo. Not that one, she thought. Not that book, Mo. But Mo had already picked up another book: *Tales From the Thousand and One Nights*.

‘I think this will do,’ he said. ‘There’s sure to be plenty of gold in those stories. But I’m warning you again, I don’t know what will happen. Because it never does happen when I want it to. I know you all think I’m a magician, but I’m not. The magic comes out of the books themselves, and I have no more idea than you or any of your men how it works.’

Capricorn leaned back in his chair looking expressionlessly at Mo. ‘How many more times are you going to tell me that, Silvertongue?’ he asked in bored tones. ‘You can say so as often as you like, but I don’t believe it. In the world on which we finally slammed the door today I frequently mingled with magicians, wizards and witches, and I very often had to deal with their obstinacy. I know that Basta has given you a graphic account of the way we used to break their will. But in your case, and now that your daughter is here as our guest, I’m sure such painful methods will not be necessary.’ With these words, Capricorn looked pointedly at Basta.

Mo tried to hold on to Meggie, but Basta moved faster. Pulling her towards him, he quickly put an arm around her neck and held her in a headlock.

‘From now on, Silvertongue,’ continued Capricorn, his voice still sounding as indifferent as if he was talking about the weather, ‘from now on, Basta will be your daughter’s personal shadow. This will provide her with reliable protection from snakes and fierce dogs but not, of course, from Basta himself, who will be kind to her only as long as I say so. And that in turn will depend on whether I am pleased with your services. Have I made myself clear?’

Mo looked first at him and then at Meggie. She did her best to look unafraid, so that he would think there was no need to worry about her – after all, she had always been a better liar than he was. But this time he saw through the lie. He knew that her fear was as great as the fear she saw in his own eyes.

Perhaps all this is just a story too, thought Meggie desperately. And any moment someone will close the book because it's so horrible and scary, and Mo and I will be back at home and I'll make him a coffee. She closed her eyes very tight, as if that would make her thoughts come true, but when she peered through her lashes Basta was still standing behind her, and Flatnose was rubbing his squashed nostrils and turning his dog-like gaze on Capricorn.

'Very well,' said Mo wearily into the silence. 'I'll read aloud to you. But Meggie and Elinor can't stay in here.'

Meggie knew exactly what he was thinking. He was thinking of her mother, and wondering who might disappear this time.

'Nonsense. Of course they stay here.' Capricorn's voice was no longer careless. 'And you'd better get started before the book there in your hand falls to dust.'

Mo closed his eyes for a moment. 'Very well, but tell Basta to put his knife away,' he said hoarsely. 'If he hurts a hair of Meggie or Elinor's heads I promise you I'll read the Plague out of a book to infect you and your men.'

Cockerell looked at Mo in alarm, and a shadow passed over even Basta's face, but Capricorn just laughed.

'Let me remind you, Silvertongue, that you're speaking of a contagious disease,' he said. 'And it doesn't stop short at little girls. So never mind the empty threats, just start reading. Now. At once. And I want to hear something out of *that* book first!'

He pointed to the book that Mo had just laid aside.

Treasure Island.



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Treasure Island

Squire Trelawney, Dr Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the whole particulars about Treasure Island, from the beginning to the end, keeping nothing back but the bearings of the island ... I take up my pen in the year of grace 17 —, and go back to the time when my father kept the Admiral Benbow inn, and the brown old seaman, with the sabre cut, first took up his lodging under our roof.

Robert Louis Stevenson,
Treasure Island

And so Meggie heard her father read aloud, for the first time in nine years, in a draughty old church. Even many, many years later the smell of burnt paper would come back to her as soon as she opened one of the books from which he had read that awful morning.

It was chilly in Capricorn's church – Meggie was to remember that later, too – although the sun must have been hot outside and high in the sky by the time Mo began to read. He simply sat down on the floor where he was, legs crossed, one book on his lap and the others beside him. Meggie quickly knelt down close to him before Basta could catch hold of her.

‘Here, get up these steps, all of you,’ Capricorn told his men. ‘And take the woman with you, Flatnose. Only Basta stays

where he is.'

Elinor resisted, but Flatnose merely seized a handful of her hair and hauled her along after him. Capricorn's men climbed the steps and sat at their master's feet, Elinor among them like a pigeon with ruffled feathers in the middle of a mob of marauding crows. The only person who looked equally out of place was the thin reader, Darius, who was sitting at the very end of the row of black-clad men and kept fiddling with his glasses.

Mo opened the book on his lap and began leafing through it, frowning, as if searching the pages for the gold he was to read out of it for Capricorn.

'Cockerell, you will cut out the tongue of anyone who utters the slightest sound while Silvertongue is reading,' said Capricorn, and Cockerell drew a knife from his belt and looked along the row of men as if already selecting his first victim. All was so deathly quiet inside the red church that Meggie thought she could hear Basta breathing behind her. But perhaps it was only the sound of her own fear.

Judging by their faces, Capricorn's men seemed to be feeling far from happy. They were looking at Mo with expressions of apprehension mingled with dislike. Meggie understood that only too well. Perhaps one of them would soon vanish into the book through which Mo was leafing so undecidedly. Had Capricorn told them that such a thing might happen? Did even *he* know it? What if she herself vanished, as Mo obviously feared? Or Elinor?

'Meggie!' Mo whispered to her, as if he had heard her thoughts. 'Hold on to me tight any way you can.' Meggie nodded, and clutched his sweater. As if that would be any use!

'Yes, I think I've found the right place,' said Mo into the silence. He cast a last glance at Capricorn, looked at Elinor, cleared his throat – and began to read.

Everything disappeared: the red walls of the church, the faces of Capricorn's men, Capricorn himself sitting in his chair. There was nothing but Mo's voice and the pictures forming in their minds from the letters on the page, like the pattern of a carpet taking shape on a loom. If Meggie could have hated Capricorn any more, she would have done so now. It was his fault that Mo had never once read aloud to her in all these years. To think of the magic he could have worked in her room with his voice, a voice that gave a different flavour to every word, made every sentence a melody! Even Cockerell had forgotten his knife and the tongues he was supposed to cut out, and was listening with a faraway expression on his face. Flatnose was staring into space, enraptured, as if a pirate ship with all sails set were truly cruising in through one of the church windows. The other men were equally entranced.

There was not a sound to be heard but Mo's voice bringing the letters and words on the page to life.

Only one of his audience seemed immune to the magic of it. Face expressionless, pale eyes fixed on Mo, Capricorn sat there waiting: waiting for the clink of coins amidst the harmony of the words, for chests of damp wood heavy with gold and silver.

Mo did not keep him waiting long. It happened as he was reading what Jim Hawkins – a boy not much older than Meggie when he embarked on his terrifying adventure – saw in a dark cave:

... Georges, and Louises, doubloons and double guineas and moidores and sequins, the pictures of all the kings of Europe for the last hundred years, strange Oriental pieces stamped with what looked like wisps of string or bits of spider's web, round pieces and square pieces, and pieces bored through the middle, as if to wear them round your neck – nearly every variety of money in the world must, I think, have found a place in that collection; and for number, I am sure they were like autumn leaves, so that my back ached with stooping and my fingers with sorting them out.

The maidservants were cleaning the last crumbs off the tables when coins suddenly came rolling over the bare wood. The women stumbled back, dropping their dish-cloths, and pressing their hands to their mouths as the coins tumbled and leaped about their feet. Gold, silver and copper coins jingled over the flagstone floor, clinking as they gathered in heaps under the benches – more and more and more of them. Some rolled as far as the steps. Capricorn's men came to life, bent to pick up the glittering little things bouncing off their boots – but then snatched back their hands. None of them dared touch the magic money. For what else could it be? Gold made of paper and printer's ink – and the sound of a human voice.

As the shower of gold stopped, at the very moment when Mo closed the book, Meggie saw there was a little sand among all the gleaming, glittering money. A few iridescent blue beetles scuttled away, and the head of an emerald-green lizard emerged from a heap of tiny coins. It stared around with fixed eyes, tongue flicking out of its sharp little mouth. Basta threw his knife at it, as if he could skewer not just the lizard but the cowardice that had seized them all. However, Meggie gave a warning cry, and the lizard darted away so fast that the tip of the blade struck the stones. Basta ran over to his knife, picked it up, and pointed it threateningly in Meggie's direction.

Capricorn rose from his chair, his face still as cold and blank as if nothing worth getting excited about had happened, and clapped his ringed hands graciously. 'Not bad for a start, Silvertongue!' he said. 'See that, Darius? That's what gold looks like – not the rusty, dented metal you've read out of books for me. But now you've heard how the thing is done I hope you'll have learnt from it. Just in case I ever require your services again.'

Darius did not reply. His eyes were fixed on Mo with such admiration in them that it wouldn't have surprised Meggie had he flung himself at her father's feet. When Mo straightened up, Darius approached him hesitantly.

Capricorn's men were still gazing at the gold as if they didn't know what to do next.

'What are you standing there for, gaping like a lot of sheep?' cried Capricorn. 'Pick it up. Go on.'

'That was wonderful!' Darius whispered to Mo, while Capricorn's men cautiously began shovelling the coins into bags and boxes. His eyes were gleaming behind his glasses like the eyes of a child who has just been given a much-wanted present. 'I've read that book many times,' he said, in a voice that shook, 'but I never saw it all as vividly as I did today. And I didn't just see it ... I smelled it, the salt and the tar and the musty odour of the whole accursed island ...'

'*Treasure Island!* Heavens above, I was petrified!' Elinor appeared behind Darius, pushing him impatiently aside. Flatnose had obviously forgotten her for the moment. 'He'll be here any minute, that's what I kept thinking. *Long John Silver* will be here, lashing out at us with his crutch.'

Mo just nodded, but Meggie could see the relief on his face. 'Here, take it!' he told Darius, handing him the book. 'I hope I never have to read out of it again. One shouldn't push one's luck.'

'You said his name not quite right every time,' Meggie whispered.

Mo tenderly stroked the bridge of her nose. 'Ah, so you noticed,' he whispered back. 'Yes, I thought that might help. Perhaps the savage old pirate won't feel we're calling to him then, I told myself, and he'll stay where he belongs. Why are you looking at me like that?'

'Why do you think?' said Elinor, answering instead of Meggie. 'Why is she looking so admiringly at her father? Because no one ever read aloud like that – even apart from the money. I saw it all, the sea and the island, as clear as if I could touch it, and I don't expect it was any different for your daughter.'

Mo had to smile. He kicked aside a few of the coins on the floor in front of him. One of Capricorn's men picked them up and surreptitiously pocketed them. As he did so, he looked at Mo as uneasily as if he feared a word from him might turn him into a frog, or one of the beetles still crawling around among the coins.

'They're afraid of you, Mo!' whispered Meggie. She could see the trepidation even on Basta's face, although he was doing his best to hide it by assuming a particularly bored expression.

Only Capricorn seemed to be left cold by what had happened. Arms folded, he stood there watching his men pick up the last of the coins. 'How much longer is this going to take?' he asked finally. 'Leave the small change where it is and sit down again. And you, Silvertongue, open the next book!'

'The *next* book!' Elinor's voice almost cracked with indignation. 'What on earth's the idea of that? The gold your men are shovelling up there is enough to last you at least two lifetimes. We're going home now!'

She was about to turn round, but Flatnose, who had finally remembered he was meant to be guarding Elinor, seized her arm roughly. Mo looked up at Capricorn.

Basta, smiling unpleasantly, laid his hand on Meggie's shoulder. 'Get on with it, Silvertongue!' he said. 'You heard. There are still plenty of books here.'

Mo looked at Meggie for a long time before bending to pick up the book he had chosen first: *Tales From the Thousand and One Nights*.

'The book that goes on and on forever,' he murmured, opening it. 'Did you know the Arabs say no one can read it right through to the end, Meggie?'

She shook her head as she sat down beside him on the cold flagstones. Basta let her, but he planted himself right behind her. Meggie didn't know much about *The Thousand and One Nights*, except that it was really a book in many volumes. The

copy that Darius had given Mo could only be a small selection. Were *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* in it, and *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*? Which story would Mo read?

Meggie thought she saw contradictory feelings on the faces of Capricorn's men: fear of what Mo might bring to life and, at the same time, a wish, a yearning almost, to be carried away by his voice once more, transported far away to a place where they could forget everything, even themselves.

There was no smell of salt and rum when Mo began reading this time. The air in Capricorn's church grew hot. Meggie's eyes began to burn, and when she rubbed them she found sand sticking to her knuckles. Once again, Capricorn's men listened to Mo's voice with bated breath, as if they were turned to stone. Capricorn alone seemed to feel nothing of the magic. But his eyes showed that even he was spellbound. They were fixed on Mo's face, as unmoving as the eyes of a snake. His red suit made his pupils look even more washed out, and his body seemed tense, like a dog scenting its prey. But this time Mo disappointed him.

The words offered up no riches, none of the treasure chests, pearls and swords set with precious stones that Mo's voice conjured up, shining and sparkling, until Capricorn's men felt as if they could pluck them from the air. Something else slipped out of the pages, though, something breathing, a creature made of flesh and blood.

A boy was suddenly standing between the still smouldering braziers where Capricorn had burned the books. Meggie was the only one to notice him. All the others were too absorbed in the story. Even Mo didn't see him, far away as he was, somewhere in the sand and the wind as his eyes made their way through the labyrinth of letters.

The boy was some three or four years older than Meggie. The turban round his head was dirty, his eyes dark with fear in his brown face. He blinked and rubbed them as if he could wipe it

all away – the wrong picture, the wrong place. He looked round the church as if he had never seen such a building before, and how could he? There wouldn't be any churches with spires in his story, or green hills like those he would see outside. The robe he wore went down to his brown feet, and in the dim light of the church it shone blue as a patch of the sky.

Meggie wondered: what will happen when they see him? He's certainly not what Capricorn was hoping for.

But Capricorn had already noticed the boy.

'Stop!' he commanded, so sharply that Mo broke off in mid-sentence and raised his head.

Abruptly, and rather unwillingly, Capricorn's men returned to reality. Cockerell was the first on his feet. 'Hey, where did *he* come from?' he growled.

The boy ducked, looked round with a terrified expression, and ran for it, doubling back and forth like a rabbit. But he didn't get far. Three men immediately sprang forward and caught him at the feet of Capricorn's statue.

Mo put the book down on the flagstones beside him and buried his face in his hands.

'Hey, Fulvio's gone!' cried one of Capricorn's men. 'Vanished into thin air!' They all stared at Mo. There it was again, the nervousness in their faces, but this time mingled not with admiration but with anger.

'Get rid of that boy, Silvertongue!' ordered Capricorn angrily. 'I have more than enough of his kind. And bring Fulvio back.'

Mo took his hands away from his face and stood up.

'For the millionth time, I *can't* bring anyone back,' he said. 'The fact that you don't believe me doesn't make that a lie. I can't do it. I can't decide who or what comes out of a book, nor who goes into it.'

Meggie reached for Mo's hand. Some of Capricorn's men came closer, two of them holding the boy. They were pulling on

his arms as if to tear him in half. Eyes wide with terror, the boy stared into their unfamiliar faces.

‘Back to your places!’ Capricorn ordered the angry men. A couple of them were already dangerously close to Mo. ‘Why all this fuss? Have you forgotten how stupidly Fulvio acted on the last job? We almost had the police down on us. So it’s the right man to have gone. And who knows, perhaps this lad will turn out to have a talent for arson. All the same, I want to see pearls now. And gold and jewels. After all, they’re what this story is all about, so let’s have some!’

An uneasy murmuring rose among the men. Nonetheless, most of them returned to the steps and perched once more on the worn treads. Only three still stood in front of Mo, staring at him with intense hostility. One of them was Basta. ‘Very well, so we can dispense with Fulvio,’ he said, never taking his eyes off Mo. ‘But who is this wretched wizard going to magic into thin air next time? I don’t want to end up in some thrice-cursed desert story!’ The men standing near him nodded in agreement, and looked at Mo so darkly that Meggie almost stopped breathing.

‘Basta, I won’t tell you again.’ Capricorn’s voice sounded menacingly calm. ‘Let him go on reading, all of you. And anyone whose teeth start chattering with fear had better go outside and help the women with the laundry.’

Some of the men looked longingly at the church door, but none ventured to leave. Finally, even the two who had been standing beside Basta turned without a word and sat down with the others.

‘You’ll pay for Fulvio yet!’ Basta whispered to Mo before he stationed himself behind Meggie again. Why couldn’t *he* have disappeared? she thought.

The boy still hadn’t uttered a sound.

‘Lock him up. We’ll see if he can be of any use to us later,’ ordered Capricorn.

The boy did not resist as Flatnose led him away. Apparently numb, he stumbled along as if he were still expecting to wake up. When would he realise this dream was never going to end?

When the door closed behind the two of them Capricorn returned to his chair. 'Go on reading, Silvertongue,' he said. 'We still have a long day ahead of us.'

But Mo looked at the books lying at his feet, and shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'You saw. It happened again. I'm tired. Be content with what I've brought you from *Treasure Island*. Those coins are worth a fortune. I want to go home, and I never want to set eyes on you again.' His voice sounded rougher than usual, as if it had read too many words aloud.

Capricorn looked at Mo appraisingly before turning his eyes to the bags and chests his men had filled with coins. He seemed to be working out how long their contents would keep him in comfort.

'Yes, you're right,' he said at last. 'We'll go on tomorrow. Otherwise we might find a stinking camel turning up here next, or another half-starved boy.'

'Tomorrow?' Mo took a step towards him. 'What do you mean? Aren't you satisfied yet? One of your men has disappeared already. Do you want to be the next?'

'I can live with the risk,' replied Capricorn, unimpressed. His men leaped to their feet as he rose from his chair and walked slowly down the altar steps. They stood there like schoolboys, although some of them were taller than Capricorn, hands clasped behind their backs as if at any moment he would inspect their fingernails for cleanliness. Meggie couldn't help remembering what Basta had said – how young he himself had been when he had joined Capricorn – and she wondered whether it was out of fear or admiration that the men bowed their heads.

Capricorn had stopped beside one of the bulging moneybags. 'Oh, I have a great many plans for you, Silvertongue, believe

me,' he said, putting his hand into the sack and running the coins through his fingers. 'Today was just a test. After all, I had to convince myself of your talents with my own eyes and ears, right? I can certainly use all this gold, but tomorrow you're going to read something else out of a book for me.'

He strolled over to the boxes which had contained the books that were now burnt to ashes, and reached into one. 'Surprise!' he announced, smiling as he held up a single book. It didn't look at all like the copy Meggie and Elinor had brought him. It still had a brightly coloured paper dust-jacket with a picture that Meggie couldn't make out from a distance. 'Oh yes, I still have one!' remarked Capricorn, scanning the uncomprehending faces with pleasure. 'My own personal copy, you might say, and tomorrow, Silvertongue, you're going to read to me from it. As I was saying, I like this world of yours very much indeed, but there's a friend from the old days that I miss. I never let your substitute try his skill with my friend – I was afraid he might fetch him here without a head, or with only one leg. But now I have you, and you're a master of your art.'

Mo was staring incredulously at the book in Capricorn's hand as if he expected it to dissolve into thin air at any moment.

'Have a rest, Silvertongue,' said Capricorn. 'Spare your precious voice. You'll have plenty of time for that, because I have to go away, and I won't be back till noon tomorrow. Take these three back to their quarters,' he told his men. 'Give them enough to eat, and some blankets for the night. Oh yes, and get Mortola to bring him tea. That kind of thing works wonders on a hoarse, tired voice. Didn't you always swear by tea sweetened with honey, Darius?' He turned enquiringly to his old reader, who simply nodded, and looked sympathetically at Mo.

'Back to our quarters? Do you mean that hole where your man with the knife put us last night?' Elinor's cheeks were flushed red, whether in horror or indignation Meggie couldn't guess. 'This is wrongful detention! No, worse – abduction!

That's it, abduction. Are you aware how many years in jail you'd get for it?'

'Abduction!' Basta savoured the word. 'Sounds good to me. Really good.'

Capricorn gave him a smile. Then he looked Elinor up and down as if he were seeing her for the first time. 'Basta,' he said. 'Is this lady any use to us?'

'Not that I know of,' replied Basta, smiling like a child who has just been given permission to smash a toy. Elinor went pale, and tried to step backwards, but Cockerell barred her way and held her firmly.

'What do we generally do with useless things, Basta?' asked Capricorn quietly.

Basta went on smiling.

'Stop that!' Mo said angrily to Capricorn. 'Stop frightening her at once, or I'm not reading you another word.'

With every appearance of indifference, Capricorn turned his back to him. And Basta kept smiling.

Meggie saw Elinor press a hand to her trembling lips, and quickly went over to stand beside her. 'She's not useless. She knows more about books than anyone else in the world!' she said, holding Elinor's other hand very tight.

Capricorn turned round. The look in his eyes made Meggie shudder, as if someone were running cold fingers down her spine. His eyelashes were pale as cobwebs.

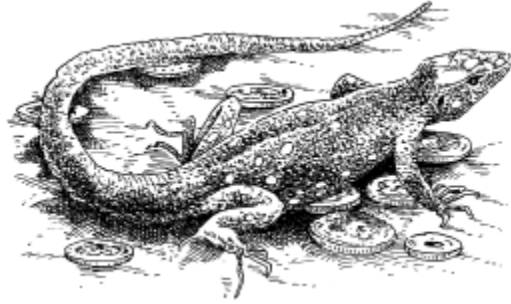
'Elinor definitely knows more stories with treasure in them than that spineless reader of yours!' Meggie stammered. 'Definitely!'

Elinor squeezed Meggie's fingers hard. Her own hand was damp with sweat. 'Yes. Absolutely, that's true,' she said huskily. 'I'm sure I can think of several more.'

'Well, well,' was all Capricorn said, his curved lips tracing a smile. 'We'll see.' Then he gave his men a signal, and they made

Elinor, Meggie and Mo file past the tables, past Capricorn's statue and the red columns, and out through the heavy door that groaned as they pushed it open.

Outside, beyond the shadow of the church on the village square, the sun shone down from a cloudless blue sky, and the air was filled with scents of summer. It was as if nothing unusual had happened.



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Gloomy Prospects

The python dropped his head lightly for a moment on Mowgli's shoulders. 'A brave heart and a courteous tongue,' said he. 'They shall carry thee far through the jungle, manling. But now go hence quickly with thy friends. Go and sleep, for the moon sets, and what follows it is not well that thou shouldst see.'

Rudyard Kipling,
The Jungle Book

They did indeed get enough to eat. Around noon a woman brought them bread and olives, and towards evening there was pasta smelling of fresh rosemary. But the food couldn't cut short the endless hours, any more than full stomachs dispelled their fear of what the next day might bring. Perhaps not even a book would have done it, but there was no point thinking of that, since they had no books, only the blank walls and the locked door. At least a new light bulb was hanging from the ceiling, so they didn't have to sit in the dark the whole time. Meggie kept looking at the crack under the door to see if night was falling yet. She imagined lizards sitting outside in the sun. She'd seen some in the square outside the church. Had the emerald-green lizard that scurried out of the heaps of coins found its way outside? And what had happened to the boy? Meggie saw his frightened expression whenever she closed her eyes.

She wondered whether the same thoughts were going through Mo's head. He had hardly said a word since they were locked up again, but had flopped down on the pile of straw and turned his face to the wall. Elinor was no more talkative. 'How generous!' was all she had muttered when Cockerell had bolted the door after them. 'Our host has graciously provided two more heaps of mouldy straw.' Then she had sat down in a corner, legs outstretched, and begun staring gloomily at her knees, then at the grubby wall.

'Mo,' asked Meggie at last, when she could no longer stand the silence, 'what do you think they're doing to the boy? And what kind of a friend are you supposed to read out of the book for Capricorn?'

'I don't know, Meggie,' was all he replied, without turning round.

So she left him alone, made herself a bed of straw beside his, then paced up and down between the bare walls. Perhaps the strange boy was the other side of one of them? She put her ear to the wall. Not a sound came through. Someone had scratched a name in the plaster: Ricardo Bentone, 19.5.96. Meggie ran her finger over the letters. A little further on there was another name, and then another. Meggie wondered what had become of them, Ricardo, Ugo and Bernardo. Perhaps I ought to scratch my name here too, she thought, just in case ... but she was careful not to think her way to the end of that sentence.

Behind her, Elinor lay down on her straw bed, sighing. When Meggie turned to her, she forced a smile. 'What wouldn't I give for a comb!' she said, pushing the hair back from her forehead. 'I'd never have thought that in a situation like this I'd miss a comb so much, of all things, but I do. Heavens, I don't even have a hairpin left. I must look like a witch, or a washing-up brush that's seen better days.'

'No, really, you look fine. Your hairpins were always falling out anyway,' said Meggie. 'Actually, I think you look younger.'

‘Younger? Hmm. Well, if you say so.’ Elinor glanced down at herself. Her mouse-grey sweater was filthy, and there were three ladders in her tights. ‘Meggie, it was very kind of you to help me back there in the church,’ she said, pulling her skirt down over her knees. My knees were like jelly, I was so scared. I don’t know what’s come over me. I feel like someone else, as if the old Elinor has driven home and left me here by myself.’ Her lips began to tremble, and Meggie thought she was going to cry, but next moment the familiar Elinor was back again. ‘Well, there we are!’ she said. ‘It’s only in an emergency that you find out what you’re truly made of. Personally, I always thought if I was a wooden statue I’d be carved out of oak, but it seems I’m more like pearwood or something else very soft. It only takes a villain like that to play with his knife in front of my nose and the wood shavings start flaking away.’

And now the tears did come, hard as Elinor tried to keep them back. Angrily, she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

‘I think you’re doing splendidly, Elinor.’ Mo was still lying with his face to the wall. ‘You’re both doing splendidly. And I could wring my own neck for dragging you two into all this.’

‘Nonsense. If anyone around here needs his neck wrung it’s Capricorn,’ said Elinor. ‘And that man Basta. My God, I’d never have thought the idea of strangling another human being would give me such enormous satisfaction. But I’m sure if I could just get my hands round that Basta’s neck, I—’

On seeing the shock in Meggie’s eyes she fell guiltily silent, but Meggie just shrugged her shoulders.

‘I feel the same,’ she murmured, and began scratching an ‘M’ on the wall with the key of her bicycle lock. Weird to think she still had that key in her trouser pocket – like a souvenir of another life.

Elinor ran her finger down one of the ladders in her tights, and Mo turned on his back and stared up at the ceiling. ‘I’m so

sorry, Meggie,' he said suddenly. 'I'm so sorry I let them take the book away from me.'

Meggie scratched an 'E' in the wall. 'It doesn't make any difference,' she said, stepping back. The Gs in her name looked like nibbled Os. 'You probably couldn't have read her back out of it again anyway.'

'No, probably not,' murmured Mo, and went on staring at the ceiling.

'It's not your fault,' said Meggie. She wanted to add: the main thing is you're with me. The main thing is for Basta never to put his knife to your throat again. I mean, I hardly remember my mother. I only know her from a couple of photographs. But Meggie said none of that, for she knew it wouldn't comfort Mo, it would probably just make him sadder than ever. For the first time, Meggie had some idea of how much he missed her mother. And for one crazy moment she felt jealous.

She scratched an 'I' in the plaster – that was an easy letter – then she lowered the key.

Footsteps were approaching outside. Elinor put her hand to her mouth when they stopped.

Basta pushed open the door, and there was someone behind him. Meggie recognised the old woman she had seen in Capricorn's house. With a dour expression on her face, she pushed past Basta and put a mug and a thermos jug on the floor. 'As if I didn't have enough to do!' she muttered, before going out again. 'So now we have to feed up our fine guests too! They might at least be put to work if you have to keep them here.'

'Tell that to Capricorn,' was all Basta replied. Then he drew his knife, smiled at Elinor, and wiped the blade on his jacket. It was getting dark outside, and his snow-white shirt shone in the gathering twilight.

'Enjoy your tea, Silvertongue,' he said, relishing the discomfort on Elinor's face. 'Mortola's put so much honey in the

jug your mouth will probably stick up with the first sip you take, but your throat will be as good as new tomorrow.'

'What have you done with the boy?' asked Mo.

'Oh, I think he's next door to you. Capricorn hasn't decided what's to become of him yet. Cockerell will try him out with a little ordeal by fire tomorrow, then we'll know if he's any use to us.'

Mo sat up. 'Ordeal by fire?' he asked, his voice both bitter and mocking. 'Well, you can't have passed that one yourself. You're even afraid of Dustfinger's matches.'

'Watch your tongue!' Basta hissed at him. 'One more word and I'll cut it out, however precious it may be.'

'Oh no, you won't,' said Mo, standing up. He took his time over filling the mug with steaming tea.

'Maybe not.' Basta lowered his voice, as if afraid of being overheard. 'But your little daughter has a tongue too, and hers isn't as valuable as yours.'

Mo flung the mug of hot tea at him, but Basta closed the door so quickly that the mug smashed into the wood. 'Sweet dreams!' he called from outside as he shot the bolts. 'See you in the morning.'

None of them said a word when he was gone, not for a long, long time. 'Mo, tell me a story,' Meggie whispered at last.

'What story do you want to hear?' he asked, putting his arm round her shoulders.

'Tell me the one about us being in Egypt,' she whispered, 'and we're looking for treasure and surviving sandstorms and scorpions and all the scary ghosts rising from their tombs to watch over their precious grave goods.'

'Oh, that story,' said Mo. 'Didn't I make it up for your eighth birthday? It's rather a gloomy tale, as far as I remember.'

'Yes, very!' said Meggie. 'But it has a happy ending. Everything turns out all right, and we come home laden with

treasure.'

'I wouldn't mind hearing that one myself,' said Elinor, her voice unsteady. She was probably still thinking of Basta's knife.

So Mo began to tell his story, without the rustle of pages, without the endless labyrinth of letters.

'Mo, nothing ever came out of a story you were just *telling*, did it?' asked Meggie at one point, suddenly feeling anxious.

'No,' he said. 'For that to happen, it seems that printer's ink is necessary and someone else needs to have made up the story.' Then he continued, and Meggie and Elinor listened until his voice had carried them far, far away. Finally, they went to sleep.

A sound woke them all. Someone was fiddling with the lock of the door. Meggie thought she heard a muffled curse.

'Oh no!' breathed Elinor. She was the first on her feet. 'They're coming to take me away! That old woman's persuaded them! Why feed us up? You, maybe,' she said, looking frantically at Mo, 'but why me?'

'Go over to the wall, Elinor,' said Mo as he moved Meggie behind him. 'Both of you keep well back from the door.'

The lock sprang open with a muffled little click, and the door was pushed just far enough open for someone to squeeze through it. Dustfinger. He cast a last anxious glance outside, then pulled the door shut behind him and leaned against it.

'So I hear you've done it again, Silvertongue!' he said, lowering his voice. 'They say the poor boy still hasn't uttered a sound. I don't blame him. I can tell you, it's a horrible feeling suddenly landing in someone else's story.'

'What are you doing here?' snapped Elinor. But the sight of Dustfinger had actually filled her with relief.

'Leave him alone, Elinor,' said Mo, moving her aside and going over to Dustfinger. 'How are your hands?' he asked.

Dustfinger shrugged. 'They put cold water on them in the kitchen, but the skin's still almost as red as the flames that licked at it.'

'Ask him what he wants!' hissed Elinor. 'And if he's just come to tell us he can't do anything about the mess we're in, then you might as well wring his lying neck!'

By way of answer, Dustfinger tossed her a bunch of keys. 'Why do you think I'm here?' he grumbled back, switching off the light. 'Stealing the car keys from Basta wasn't easy, and a word of thanks might not be out of place, but we can think about that later. We don't want to hang about any longer – let's get out of here.' Cautiously, he opened the door and listened. 'There's a sentry posted up on the church tower,' he whispered, 'but the guards are keeping watch on the hills, not the village. The dogs are in their kennels, and even if we do have to deal with them, luckily they like me better than Basta.'

'Why should we suddenly trust him?' whispered Elinor to Mo. 'Suppose there's some other devilry behind this?'

'I want you to take me with you. That's my only motive!' snapped Dustfinger. 'There's nothing here for me any more. Capricorn's let me down. He's sent the only scrap of hope I still had up in smoke! He thinks he can do what he likes with me. Dustfinger's only a dog you can kick without fearing he may bite back, but he's wrong there. He burned the book, so I'm taking away the reader I brought him. And as for you,' he said, jabbing his burnt finger into Elinor's chest, 'you can come because you have a car. No one gets out of this village on foot, not even Capricorn's men, not with the snakes that infest these hills. But I can't drive, and so ...'

'I knew it!' Elinor almost forgot to keep her voice down. 'He just wants to save his own skin. That's why he's helping us! He doesn't have a guilty conscience, oh no. Why should he?'

'I don't care why he's helping us, Elinor,' Mo interrupted her impatiently. 'We have to get away from here, that's what

matters. But we're going to take someone else with us too.'

'Someone else? Who?' Dustfinger looked at him uneasily.

'The boy. The one I condemned yesterday to the same fate as you,' replied Mo, making his way past Dustfinger and out of the door. 'Basta said he's next door to us, and a lock is no obstacle to your clever fingers.'

'I burned those clever fingers today!' muttered Dustfinger angrily. 'Still, just as you please. Your soft heart will be the ruin of us yet.'

When Dustfinger knocked on the door bearing the number 5 a faint rustling could be heard on the other side of it. 'Seems like they were going to let him live,' he whispered as he got to work on the lock. 'They put people condemned to death in the crypt under the church. Ever since I told Basta for a joke that a White Lady haunts the stone coffins down there, he turns white as a sheet whenever Capricorn sends him into the crypt.' He chuckled quietly at the memory, like a schoolboy who's just played a particularly good practical joke.

Meggie looked across at the church. 'Do they often condemn people to death?' she asked quietly.

Dustfinger shrugged. 'Not as often as they used to. But it does happen.'

'Stop telling her such stories!' whispered Mo. He and Elinor never took their eyes off the church tower. The sentry was posted high up on the wall beside the belfry. It made Meggie dizzy just to look up there.

'Those are no stories, Silvertongue, it's the truth! Don't you recognise the truth when you meet it any more? The truth's not pretty, of course. No one likes to look it in the face.' Dustfinger stepped back from the door and bowed. 'After you. I've picked the lock, you can fetch him out.' Even with his burnt fingers it hadn't taken him long.

‘You go in,’ Mo whispered to Meggie. ‘He’ll be less afraid of you.’

It was pitch dark on the other side of the door, but Meggie heard a rustle as she stepped into the room, as if an animal were moving somewhere in the straw. Dustfinger put his arm through the doorway and handed her a torch. When Meggie switched it on, the beam of light fell on the boy’s dark face. The straw they had given him seemed even mouldier than the pile on which Meggie had slept, but the boy looked as if he hadn’t closed his eyes since Flatnose had locked him in anyway. His arms were tightly clasped round his legs, as if they were all he could rely on. Perhaps he was still waiting for his nightmare to end.

‘Come with us!’ whispered Meggie, reaching out a hand to him. ‘We want to help you! We’ll take you away from here!’

He didn’t move, just stared at her, his eyes narrow with distrust.

‘Hurry up, Meggie!’ breathed Mo through the door.

The boy glanced at him and retreated until his back was right up against the wall.

‘Please!’ whispered Meggie. ‘You must come! The people here will do bad things to you.’

He was still looking at her. Then he stood up, cautiously, never taking his eyes off her. He was taller than she was by almost a hand’s breadth. Suddenly, he leaped forward, making for the open door. He pushed Meggie aside so roughly that she fell over, but he couldn’t get past Mo.

‘Here, take it easy!’ Mo said under his breath. ‘We really do want to help you, but you must do as we say, understand?’

The boy glared at him with dislike. ‘You’re all devils!’ he whispered. ‘Devils or demons!’ So he did understand their language, and why not? His own story was told in every language in the world.

Meggie got up and rubbed her knee. She must have grazed it on the stone floor. 'If you want to see some real devils then all you have to do is stay here!' she hissed at the boy as she pushed her way past him. He flinched as if she were a witch.

Mo drew the boy to his side. 'See that man on watch up there?' he whispered, pointing to the church tower. 'If he sees us they'll kill us.'

The boy looked up at the man on guard.

Dustfinger went over to him. 'Hurry up, will you?' he said quietly. 'If the lad doesn't want to go with us then he can just stay here. And the rest of you take your shoes off,' he added, glancing at the boy's bare feet, 'or you'll make more noise than a flock of goats.'

Elinor grumbled something in a cross voice, but she obeyed, and the boy did follow them, if hesitantly. Dustfinger hurried on ahead as if trying to outstrip his own shadow. The alley down which he led them sloped so steeply that Meggie kept stumbling, and every time Elinor stubbed her toes on the bumpy cobblestones she uttered a quiet curse. It was dark between the close-set houses. Masonry arches stretched from one side of the street to the other, as if to prevent the walls from collapsing. The rusty street lights cast ghostly shadows. Every noise sounded threatening, every cat scurrying out of a doorway made Meggie jump. But Capricorn's village was asleep. They passed only one guard, leaning on the wall in a side street and smoking. Two tom cats were fighting somewhere on the rooftops, and the guard bent to pick up a stone to throw at them. Dustfinger took advantage of the moment. Meggie was very glad he had made them take off their shoes. They slipped soundlessly past the guard whose back was still turned, but Meggie dared not breathe again until they were round the next corner. Once again, she noticed the many empty houses, the blank windows, the dilapidated doors. What had wrecked these homes? Just the course of time? Had the people who once lived here run away from Capricorn, or was the village already

abandoned before he and his men took up residence? Hadn't Dustfinger said something like that?

He had stopped. He raised his hand in a warning gesture, and put a finger to his lips. They had reached the outskirts of the village. Only the car park still lay ahead. Two street lights illuminated the surface of the cracked asphalt, and a tall wire-netting fence rose to their left. 'The arena for Capricorn's ceremonies and festivities is on the other side of that fence,' whispered Dustfinger. 'I suppose the village children once played football there, but these days it's the scene of Capricorn's diabolical celebrations: bonfires, brandy, a few shots fired into the air, fireworks – that's their idea of fun.'

They put their shoes on before following Dustfinger into the car park. Meggie kept looking at the wire fence. Diabolical celebrations. She could almost see the bonfires ... 'Come on, Meggie!' urged Mo, leading her on. The sound of rushing water could be heard somewhere in the darkness, and Meggie remembered the bridge they had crossed on the way here. Suppose a guard was stationed there this time?

There were several cars in the car park, including Elinor's, which was parked a little way from the others. They all kept looking around anxiously as they ran towards it. Behind them the church tower rose high above the rooftops, and there was nothing now to shield them from the sentry's eyes. Meggie couldn't see him at this distance, but she was sure he was still there. From such a height they must look like black beetles crawling over a table. Did he have a pair of binoculars?

'Come on, Elinor!' whispered Mo. It seemed to be taking her forever to unlock the car door.

'All right, all right!' she growled back. 'I just don't have such nimble hands as our light-fingered friend.'

Mo put his arm round Meggie's shoulders as he looked around, but apart from a few stray cats he could see nothing moving in the car park or among the houses. Reassured, he

made Meggie get into the back seat. The boy hesitated for a moment, examining the car as if it were some strange animal and he couldn't be sure whether it was kindly disposed or would swallow him alive, but finally he got in too. Meggie scowled at him and moved as far away from him as possible. Her knee still hurt.

'Where's the matchstick-eater?' whispered Elinor. 'Dammit, don't tell me the man's disappeared again.'

Meggie was the first to spot him. He was stealing over to the other cars. Elinor clutched the steering-wheel as if resisting only with difficulty the temptation to drive off without him. 'What's he up to this time?' she hissed.

None of them knew the answer. Dustfinger was gone for an excruciatingly long time, and when he came back he was closing a flick-knife.

'What was the idea of that?' Elinor snapped, when he squeezed into the back seat next to the boy. 'Didn't you say we must hurry? And what were you doing with that knife? Not cutting someone open, I hope!'

'Is my name Basta?' enquired Dustfinger, annoyed, as he forced his legs in behind the driver's seat. 'I was slitting their tyres, that's all. Just to be on the safe side.' He was still holding the knife.

Meggie looked at it uneasily. 'That's Basta's knife,' she said.

Dustfinger smiled as he put it in his trouser pocket. 'Not any more. I'd like to have stolen his silly amulet too, but he wears it round his neck even at night, and that *would* have been too dangerous.'

Somewhere a dog began to bark. Mo wound down his window and put his head out, looking concerned.

'Believe it or not, it's only toads making all that racket,' said Elinor. But what Meggie suddenly heard echoing through the night was nothing like the croaking of toads, and when she

looked in alarm through the back window a man was climbing out of one of the parked vehicles, a dusty, dirty white delivery van. It was one of Capricorn's men. Meggie had seen him in the church. He looked around him with a face still dazed by sleep.

Before Meggie could stop her, Elinor started the engine, and the man snatched a shotgun from his back and stumbled towards the car. For a moment Meggie almost felt sorry for him – he looked so sleepy and baffled. What would Capricorn do to a guard who fell asleep on duty? But then he aimed the gun and fired it. Meggie ducked her head well below the back of the seat, and Elinor pressed her foot down hard on the accelerator.

'Damn it all!' she shouted at Dustfinger. 'Didn't you see that man when you were slinking about among the cars?'

'No, I didn't!' Dustfinger shouted back. 'Now, drive! Not *that* way! It's over there. We must get to the road!'

Elinor wrenched the steering-wheel around. The boy was huddled down beside Meggie. At every shot he had closed his eyes tight and put his hands over his ears. Were there any guns in his story? Probably not, any more than there were cars. His and Meggie's heads knocked together as Elinor's car bumped over the stony track. When it finally reached the road things weren't much better.

'This isn't the road we came along!' cried Elinor. Capricorn's village loomed over them like a fortress. The houses simply refused to get any smaller.

'Oh yes, it is! But Basta met us further down when we arrived.' Dustfinger was clinging to the seat with one hand and to his rucksack with the other. A furious chattering came from the bag, and the boy cast it a terrified glance.

Meggie thought she recognised the place where Basta had met them when they drove past it – it was the hill from which she had seen the village for the first time. Then the houses suddenly disappeared, engulfed by the night, as if Capricorn's village had never existed.

There was no guard posted on the bridge, nor at the rusty barrier across the road cutting off the way to the village. Meggie looked back at it until the darkness had swallowed it up. It's over, she thought. It really is all over.

The night was clear. Meggie had never seen so many stars. The sky stretched above the black hills like a cloth embroidered with tiny beads. The whole world seemed to consist of hills, like a cat arching its back at the face of the night – no human beings, no houses. No fear.

Mo turned round and stroked the hair back from Meggie's forehead. 'Everything all right?' he asked.

She nodded and closed her eyes. Suddenly, all Meggie wanted to do was sleep – if only the pounding of her heart would let her.

'It's a dream,' murmured a toneless voice beside her. 'Only a dream. It's just a dream. What else can it be?'

Meggie turned to the boy, who wasn't looking at her. 'It has to be a dream!' he repeated, nodding vigorously as if to encourage himself. 'Everything looks wrong, false, weird, like in dreams, and now,' he murmured, turning his head to indicate the surroundings outside, 'now we're flying. Or the night is flying past us. Or something.'

Meggie could almost have smiled. She wanted to tell him it wasn't a dream, but she was just too tired to explain the whole complicated story. She looked at Dustfinger. He was patting the fabric of his rucksack, probably trying to soothe his angry marten.

'Don't look at me like that!' he said when he saw Meggie watching him. 'You can't expect *me* to explain. Your father will have to do that. After all, the poor lad's nightmare is his fault.'

Mo's guilty conscience showed clearly on his face when he turned to the boy. 'What's your name?' he asked. 'It wasn't in the—' But there he broke off.

The boy looked at him suspiciously, then bowed his head. 'Farid,' he said dully. 'My name is Farid, but I believe it's unlucky to speak in a dream. You never find your way back if you do.' He shut his mouth tightly and stared straight ahead, as if to avoid looking at anyone, and said no more. Did he have a mother and father in his story? Meggie couldn't remember. It had just mentioned a boy, a boy without a name who served a band of thieves.

'It's a dream,' he whispered again. 'Only a dream. The sun will rise and it will all disappear. That's what it'll do.'

Mo looked at him, unhappy and at a loss, like someone who has handled a young bird, knowing it can never return to the nest. Poor Mo, thought Meggie. Poor Farid. But she was thinking of something else too, and she was ashamed of herself for it. Ever since she had seen the lizard crawl out of the golden coins in Capricorn's church she couldn't help thinking about it. I wish I could do that, her thoughts had kept saying to her, very quietly. The wish had settled like a cuckoo in the nest of her heart, where it kept fluffing up its plumage and making itself at home, no matter how hard she tried to throw it out. I wish I could do that, it whispered. I'd like to bring them out of books, touch them, all those characters, all those wonderful characters. I want them to come out of the pages and sit beside me, I want them to smile at me, I want, I want, I want ...

Outside, it was still as dark as if morning would never come.

'I'm going to drive straight on,' said Elinor, 'until we reach my house.'

Far behind them, headlights showed, like fingers probing the night.



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Snakes and Thorns

‘None of that matters now,’ said Twilight. ‘Look behind you.’

The Borribles did and there, just a little beyond the rim of the bridge, they saw a halo of harsh whiteness reflected on the underneath of the dark sky. It was the beam of a car’s headlights as it got into position on the north side of the bridge, the side the runaways had left only moments before.

**Michael de Larrabeiti,
*The Borribles Go For Broke***

Behind them the headlights were getting closer, no matter how fast Elinor drove.

‘It could be just any old car,’ said Meggie, but she knew that was unlikely. There was only one village on the bumpy, potholed road they had been following for almost an hour, and that was Capricorn’s. Their pursuers could only have come from there.

‘Now what?’ asked Elinor. She was in such a state the car was weaving all over the road. ‘I’m not letting them lock me up in that hole again. No. No. No.’ At each ‘No’ she struck the steering-wheel with the palm of her hand. ‘Didn’t you say you’d slit their tyres?’ she snapped at Dustfinger.

‘Yes, and so I did!’ he replied angrily. ‘Obviously they’ve thought of that kind of thing. Ever heard of spare tyres? Go on, step on it! There ought to be a village quite soon. It can’t be far away now. If we can make it that far ...’

‘If, yes. *If* is the question,’ said Elinor, tapping the fuel gauge. ‘I’ve got enough petrol for about another ten kilometres, twenty at the most.’

But they never got that far. As they swerved round a sharp bend one of the front tyres blew out. Elinor only just managed to wrench the steering-wheel round before the car skidded off the road. Meggie screamed, burying her face in her hands. For a terrible moment she thought they were going to plunge down the steep slope to their left, the bottom of which disappeared in the darkness, but the car skidded to the right, scraped its wing against the low stone wall on the other side of the road, gave a last gasp and came to a halt under the low branches of a chestnut oak that leaned over the road.

‘Oh hell, hell, bloody hell!’ swore Elinor, undoing her seat-belt. ‘Everyone all right?’

‘Now I know why I’ve never trusted cars,’ muttered Dustfinger, opening his door.

Meggie sat there trembling all over. Mo pulled her out of the car and looked anxiously at her face. ‘Are you all right?’

Meggie nodded.

Farid climbed out on Dustfinger’s side. Did he still think he was dreaming?

Dustfinger stood in the road, rucksack over his shoulder, listening. The unmistakable sound of an engine came purring through the night from far away.

‘We must get the car off the road!’ he said.

‘What?’ Elinor looked at him in horror.

‘We’ll have to push it down the slope.’

‘My car!’ Elinor was almost screaming.

‘He’s right, Elinor,’ said Mo. ‘Perhaps we can shake them off that way. We’ll push the car down the slope – they may not notice it in the dark, and even if they do, they’ll think we came off the road. Then we can climb up the hill on the other side and hide among the trees.’

Elinor cast a doubtful glance at the hill on their right. ‘But it’s much too steep! And what about the snakes?’

‘I’m sure Basta has a new knife by now,’ Dustfinger reminded her.

Elinor gave him her darkest look and, without another word, went round to the back of her car to check inside the boot. ‘Where’s our luggage?’ she asked.

Dustfinger looked at her with amusement. ‘I expect Basta’s divided it out among Capricorn’s maids. He likes to ingratiate himself with them.’

Elinor looked at him as if she didn’t believe a word of it, but then quickly closed the boot, braced her arms against the car, and began to push.

They couldn’t do it.

Hard as they pushed and shoved, Elinor’s car only rolled off the road but would not slide more than a few metres down the slope. Then it stopped with its bonnet stuck in the undergrowth and refused to go any further. Meanwhile, the sound of the engine, so curiously out of place in this desolate wilderness, was getting alarmingly loud. Dustfinger gave the obstinate car a final kick, and they all clambered back up to the road, sweating. After climbing over an ancient wall on the other side they struggled on up the slope. Anything to get away from the road itself. Mo hauled Meggie along behind him whenever she got stuck, and Dustfinger helped Farid. Elinor had her work cut out getting herself up the hillside, which was criss-crossed with low walls that had been built in a laborious attempt to wrest narrow fields and orchards from the poor soil, somewhere to grow a few olive trees and grape vines, anything that would

bear fruit here. But the trees had run wild, and the ground was covered with fruit that was no longer harvested, for the people who once lived here had long since left to find an easier life elsewhere.

‘Keep your heads down!’ gasped Dustfinger, ducking behind one of the ruined walls. ‘They’re coming!’ Mo pulled Meggie down under the nearest tree. The tangled thorn bushes growing among its gnarled roots were just tall enough to hide them.

‘What about the snakes?’ Elinor whispered as she stumbled after them.

‘Too cold for snakes at the moment!’ whispered Dustfinger from his hiding-place. ‘Haven’t you learnt anything from all those clever books of yours?’

Elinor was about to snap back an answer, but Mo quickly put a hand over her mouth to keep her quiet. The vehicle appeared on the road below them. It was the white delivery van in which the guard had been sleeping. Without slowing down, it drove past the place where they had pushed Elinor’s estate car over the slope, and disappeared round the next bend. Relieved, Meggie was about to raise her head above the thorn bushes when Mo pushed her down again. ‘Not yet!’ he muttered, straining his ears.

The night was perfectly still. Meggie had never known one like it. It was as if she could hear the trees breathing – the trees, the grass, the night itself.

They watched the van headlights emerge on the slope of the next hill: two fingers of light groping their way along an invisible road in the dark. But suddenly they stopped moving.

‘They’re turning!’ whispered Elinor. ‘Oh God! Now what?’

She tried to stand up, but Mo held her back. ‘Are you mad?’ he hissed. ‘It’s too late to climb any further. They’d see us.’

Mo was right. The delivery van was speeding back up the road. Meggie saw it stop just a few metres from where they had

pushed Elinor's car off the road. She heard the van doors open and saw two men get out. Both had their backs to the fugitives, but when one of them turned and looked suspiciously up the slope Meggie thought she recognised Basta's face, though it was little more than a patch of paler colour in the night.

'There's the car,' said the other man.

Was that Flatnose? He was certainly tall and broad enough.

'See if they're in it.'

Yes, that *was* Basta. Meggie would have known his voice among a thousand others.

Flatnose made his way down the slope, clumsy as a bear. Meggie heard him cursing the thorns, the prickles, the darkness and the wretched riff-raff he was having to stumble after in the middle of the night. Basta was still standing in the road. His face was sharply outlined when he lit a cigarette with a lighter. The white smoke drifted up to them until Meggie thought she could almost smell it.

'They're not here,' called Flatnose. 'They must have got away on foot. Hell, do you think we have to follow them?'

Basta went over to the roadside and looked down. Then he turned and looked up at the slope where Meggie was crouching beside Mo, her heart thudding wildly. 'They can't have got far,' he said. 'But it'll be difficult to find their trail in the dark.'

'Exactly!' Flatnose was panting as he appeared back on the road. 'We're not bloody trackers, are we?'

Basta did not reply. He just stood there, listening and inhaling his cigarette smoke. Then he whispered something to Flatnose. Meggie's heart almost stopped.

Flatnose looked round anxiously. 'Nah, let's get the dogs instead!' Meggie heard him say. 'Even if they're hiding somewhere around here, how do we know whether they climbed up or down?'

Basta glanced at the trees, looked down the road, and trod out his cigarette. Then he went back to the van and took out two shotguns. 'We'll try going down first,' he said, tossing Flatnose one of the guns. 'I'm sure that fat woman would rather climb downhill.' And without another word, he vanished into the darkness. Flatnose cast the van a longing glance, then trudged after him, grumbling.

The two were barely out of sight before Dustfinger rose to his feet, soundless as a shadow, and pointed up the slope. Meggie's heart was beating in her throat as they followed him. They darted from tree to tree, from bush to bush, constantly looking behind them. Every time a twig cracked underfoot Meggie jumped, but luckily Basta and Flatnose were making a fair amount of noise themselves as they worked their way downhill through the undergrowth.

A time came when they couldn't see the road any more. But their fear did not leave them, the fear that Basta might have turned back already and was now following them uphill. Yet, however often they stopped and listened, all they could hear was their own breathing.

'They'll soon realise they've gone the wrong way,' Dustfinger whispered after a while. 'Then they'll go back for the dogs. We're lucky they didn't bring them in the first place. Basta doesn't think much of those dogs, and he's right. I've fed them cheese often enough, and cheese dulls a dog's nose. All the same, he'll fetch them sooner or later, because even Basta doesn't like taking bad news back to Capricorn.'

'Then we must just go faster,' said Mo.

'Go faster where?' Elinor was still fighting for breath.

Dustfinger looked round. Meggie wondered why. She could hardly make anything out, it was so dark. 'We must keep going south,' said Dustfinger. 'Towards the coast. We must hide among other people. That's the only thing that can save us.'

Down there the nights are bright and nobody believes in the Devil.'

Farid was standing beside Meggie, gazing at the night sky as if he could make morning come, or find the people Dustfinger had mentioned somewhere, but there wasn't a light to be seen in the darkness except for the tangle of stars sparkling cold and distant in the heavens. For a moment, Meggie felt as if those stars were eyes giving their presence away, and imagined she could hear them whispering, 'Look, Basta, there they go, down there! Quick, catch them!'

They stumbled on, keeping close together so that no one would get lost. Dustfinger had taken Gwin out of his rucksack and put him on his chain before letting him run with them. The marten didn't seem to like it. Dustfinger had to keep hauling him out of the undergrowth, away from all the promising scents that their human noses couldn't pick up. The marten spat and snarled with annoyance, biting and tearing at the chain.

'Curse the little brute, I'm sure to fall over it,' said Elinor crossly. 'Can't you keep it away from my sore feet? I tell you one thing, the moment we're in decent human company again I'm going to take the best hotel room money can buy and put my poor feet up on a big soft cushion.'

'You've still got money on you?' Mo sounded incredulous. 'They took all mine first thing.'

'Yes, Basta took my wallet too,' said Elinor. 'But I think ahead. I have my credit card somewhere safe.'

'Is anywhere safe from Basta?' Dustfinger dragged Gwin away from a tree trunk.

'Oh yes,' replied Elinor. 'Men are never particularly keen to search fat old ladies. Which can be useful. That was how some of my most valuable books came into my—' She interrupted herself abruptly, clearing her throat when her eyes fell on Meggie. But Meggie acted as if she hadn't heard Elinor's last remark, or at least hadn't understood what she meant.

‘You’re not all that fat!’ Meggie said. ‘And *old* is a bit of an exaggeration!’ Oh, how her own feet hurt.

‘Well, thank you very much, darling!’ said Elinor. ‘I think I’ll buy you from your father so you can say nice things like that to me three times a day. How much do you want for her, Mo?’

‘I’ll have to think about it,’ replied Mo. ‘Suppose I lend her to you for a few days now and then?’

They chatted like this, voices scarcely raised above a whisper, as they struggled through the thorny growth on the hillside. It didn’t matter what they talked about, for their hushed conversation had only one purpose: to fend off the fear and exhaustion weighing down all their limbs. On and on they walked, hoping that Dustfinger knew where he was taking them. Meggie kept close behind Mo all the time. At least his back offered some protection from the thorny branches which kept catching at her clothes and scratching her face, like vicious animals with needle-sharp claws lying in wait in the dark.

At last, they came upon a footpath they could follow. It was littered with empty cartridge cases dropped by hunters who had dealt out death in this silent place. Walking was easier on the trodden earth, although Meggie was so tired she could hardly pick her feet up. When she stumbled against the back of Mo’s legs for the second time, he put her on his back and carried her as he used to do before she could keep up with his long legs. He had called her ‘Little Flea’ in those days, or ‘Feather Girl’, or ‘Tinker Bell’ after the fairy in *Peter Pan*. Sometimes he still called her Tinker Bell.

Wearily, Meggie rested her face against his shoulders and tried to think of *Peter Pan* instead of snakes, or men with knives. But this time her own story was too strong to give way to an invented one. Mo was right: fear, unfortunately, devours everything.

It was a long time since Farid had said anything. Most of the time he stumbled along after Dustfinger. He seemed to have

taken a fancy to Gwin. Whenever the marten's chain got caught up somewhere Farid would rush to free him, even if Gwin only hissed at him in return and snapped at his fingers. Once he sank his teeth into the boy's thumb and made it bleed.

'Well, do you still think this is a dream?' asked Dustfinger ironically as Farid wiped the blood away.

The boy didn't answer, just examined his sore thumb. Then he sucked it and spat. 'What else could it be?' he asked.

Dustfinger looked at Mo, but he seemed so deep in thought that he didn't notice the glance. 'How about another story?' said Dustfinger.

Farid laughed. 'Another story. I like that idea. I've always been fond of stories.'

'Oh yes? And how do you like this one?'

'Too many thorns, and I wish it would get light, but at least I haven't had to work yet. That's something.'

Meggie couldn't help smiling.

A bird called in the distance. Gwin stopped and raised his round muzzle, sniffing the air. The night belongs to beasts of prey, and always has. It's easy to forget that when you're indoors, protected by light and solid walls. Night provides cover for hunters, making it easy for them to creep up and strike their prey blind. Words about the night from one of her favourite books slipped into Meggie's mind: *'This is the hour of pride and power, talon and tush and claw.'*

She snuggled her face against Mo's shoulder once more. Perhaps I ought to walk again, she thought. He's been carrying me for so long. But then she nodded off to sleep still perched on his back.



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Basta

This grove, that was now so peaceful, must then have rung with cries, I thought; and even with the thought I could believe I heard it ringing still.

**Robert Louis Stevenson,
*Treasure Island***

Meggie woke up when Mo stopped. The path had brought them almost to the crest of the hill. It was still dark, but the night was growing paler as if lifting her skirts a little way off to let the new morning appear.

‘We must take a breather, Dustfinger,’ Meggie heard Mo saying. ‘The boy can hardly keep up, Elinor’s feet must need a rest, and if you ask me this wouldn’t be a bad place for one.’

‘What feet?’ asked Elinor, sinking to the ground with a groan. ‘You mean those poor sore objects attached to my legs?’

‘That’s what I mean,’ said Mo, as he pulled her up again. ‘But they must go just a little further. We’ll rest up there.’

A good fifty metres to their left, at the very top of the hill, there was a house, if you could call it that, huddled among the olive trees. Meggie slipped off Mo’s back before they climbed up to it. The walls looked as if someone had piled up a number of stones in a hurry, the roof had collapsed, and where there must once have been a door only a black hole now gaped.

Mo had to bend low to make his way in. Broken shingles from the roof covered the floor, there was an empty sack in a corner, some broken earthenware shards, perhaps from a dish or a plate, and a few bones gnawed clean. Mo sighed.

‘Not a very comfortable place, Meggie,’ he said. ‘But try imagining you’re hiding out with the Lost Boys, or ...’

‘Or in Huckleberry Finn’s tub.’ Meggie looked round. ‘I think I’d rather sleep outside, all the same.’

Elinor came in. The accommodation didn’t seem to appeal much to her either.

Mo gave Meggie a kiss and went back to the door. ‘Believe me, it’ll be safer in here,’ he said.

Meggie looked at him in concern. ‘Where are you going? You have to get some sleep too.’

‘Oh, I’m not tired.’ His face gave away his lie. ‘Go to sleep now, all right?’ Then he went out again.

Elinor pushed the broken shingles aside with her foot. ‘Come on,’ she said, taking off her jacket and spreading it on the floor. ‘Let’s try to make ourselves comfortable together. Your father’s right, we must just imagine we’re somewhere else. Why are adventures so much more fun when you read about them?’ she murmured, stretching out on the floor.

Cautiously, Meggie lay down beside her. ‘At least it isn’t raining,’ remarked Elinor, looking at the collapsed roof. ‘And we have the stars above us, even if they’re fading. Perhaps I ought to have a few holes knocked in my own roof at home.’ With an impatient nod, she told Meggie to lay her head on her arm. ‘In case any spiders try crawling into your ears while you’re asleep,’ she said, closing her eyes. ‘Oh Lord,’ Meggie heard her add in a murmur, ‘I’ll have to buy a new pair of feet, I really will. There’s no hope for these.’ With that she was asleep.

But Meggie lay with her eyes wide open, listening to the sounds outside. She heard Mo talking quietly to Dustfinger, but she couldn't make out the words. Once she thought she heard Basta's name. The boy Farid had stayed outside too, but he made no sound.

Elinor began snoring after only a few minutes, but hard as Meggie tried she couldn't get to sleep, so she got up quietly and slipped outside. Mo was awake, sitting with his back against a tree, watching the morning light drive the night from the sky above the surrounding hills. Dustfinger was sitting a little further off. He raised his head only briefly when Meggie came out of the hut. Was he thinking of the fairies and the brownies? Farid lay beside him, curled up like a dog, and Gwin was sitting at his feet eating something – Meggie quickly turned her head away.

Dawn was breaking over the hills, casting light on summit after summit. Meggie saw houses in the distance, scattered like toys on the green slopes. The sea must lie somewhere beyond them. She put her head on Mo's lap and looked up at his face.

'They won't find us here, will they?' she asked.

'No, of course not!' he said, but his face wasn't half as carefree as his voice. 'Why aren't you asleep in there with Elinor?'

'She snores,' murmured Meggie.

Mo smiled. Then, frowning, he looked down the hillside to the place where the path lay, hidden by rockroses, gorse and thorns.

Dustfinger never took his eyes off the path either. The sight of the two men on watch made Meggie feel better, and soon she was sleeping as deeply as Farid – as if the ground outside the tumbledown house were covered with downy feathers instead of thorns.

When Mo shook her awake, she thought at first it had all been just a bad dream – but his hand was over her mouth. He was holding a finger to his lips in warning. Meggie heard the rustle of grass and the barking of a dog. Mo pulled her to her feet and pushed her and Farid into the shelter of the dark hovel. Elinor was still snoring. She looked like a young girl with the light of dawn on her face, but as soon as Mo had woken her all her weariness, anxiety and fear came rushing back.

Mo and Dustfinger stationed themselves by the doorway, one to the left and the other to the right, their backs pressed to the wall. Men's voices broke the quiet of the morning. Meggie thought she could hear the dogs sniffing, and wished she could dissolve into thin air, odourless and invisible air. Farid stood beside her, his eyes wide. Meggie noticed for the first time that they were almost black. She had never seen such dark eyes, and his lashes were as long as a girl's.

Elinor was leaning against the wall opposite, biting her lips nervously. Dustfinger made a sign to Mo, and before Meggie realised what their plan was they made their way out. The olive trees where they took cover were stunted, with matted branches hanging almost to the ground, as if the weight of their leaves was too much for them. A child could easily have hidden behind them, but did they provide enough shelter for two grown men?

Meggie peered out of the doorway. Her heart was beating so fast that it almost suffocated her. Outside, the sun was rising higher and higher. Daylight crept into every valley, beneath every tree, and suddenly Meggie wished for the night again. Mo was kneeling down so that his head couldn't be seen above the tangled branches. Dustfinger was pressed close to a crooked tree trunk, and there, terrifyingly close, twenty paces at most away from the two of them, was Basta. He was making his way up the slope through thistles and knee-high grass.

'They'll have reached the valley by now!' Meggie heard a rough voice call, and next moment Flatnose appeared beside

Basta. They had brought two vicious-looking dogs with them. Meggie saw the dogs' broad skulls pushing through the grass, and heard them snuffling.

'What, with two children and that fat woman?' Basta shook his head and looked round. Farid peered past Meggie – and flinched back as if something had bitten him when he saw the two men.

'Basta?' Soundlessly, Elinor's lips formed his name. Meggie nodded, and Elinor went even paler than she was already.

'Damn it, Basta, how much longer are you going to trudge around here?' Flatnose's voice echoed a long way in the silence that lay over the hills. 'The snakes will soon be waking up, and I'm hungry. Let's just say they fell into the valley with the car. We'll give it another push and no one will find out! The snakes will probably get them anyway. And if not, then they'll lose their way, starve, get sunstroke – oh, who cares what happens? But anyway we'll never see them again.'

'He's been feeding them cheese!' Basta furiously hauled the dogs to his side. 'That bloody little fire-eater has been feeding them cheese to ruin their noses. But nobody would believe me. No wonder they whine with joy every time they see his ugly mug.'

'You beat them too much,' grunted Flatnose. 'That's why they won't go to any trouble for you. Dogs don't like being beaten.'

'Nonsense. You have to beat them or they'll bite you! They like the fire-eater because he's like them – he whines, he's sly and he bites.' One of the dogs lay down in the grass and licked its paws. Angrily, Basta kicked it in the ribs and hauled it to its feet. 'You can go back to the village if you like!' he spat at Flatnose. 'But I'm going to get that fire-eater and cut off all his fingers one by one. Then we'll see how cleverly he can juggle. I always said he couldn't be trusted, but the boss thought his little tricks with fire were so entertaining.'

‘OK, OK. Everyone knows you can’t stand him.’ Flatnose sounded bored. ‘But he may have nothing to do with the disappearance of that lot. You know he’s always come and gone as he pleased. Maybe he’ll turn up again tomorrow knowing nothing about it.’

‘Yeah, right,’ growled Basta. He walked on. Every step brought him closer to the trees behind which Mo and Dustfinger were hiding. ‘And Silvertongue pinched the fat woman’s car key from under my pillow, did he? No. This time no excuses will do Dustfinger any good. Because he took something else too – something of mine.’

Involuntarily, Dustfinger put his hand to his belt, as if he were afraid that Basta’s knife could call out to its master. One of the dogs raised its head and tugged Basta on towards the trees.

‘He’s found something!’ Basta lowered his voice. ‘The stupid creature’s picked up a scent!’

Ten more paces, perhaps fewer, and he would be among the trees. What were they going to do? What on earth were they going to do?

Flatnose was trudging along after Basta with a sceptical expression on his face. ‘They’ve probably scented a wild boar,’ Meggie heard him say. ‘You want to be careful, they can run you right down. Oh no, I think there’s a snake there. One of those black snakes. You’ve got the antidote in the car, right?’

He stood there perfectly still, rooted to the spot and staring down at the ground in front of his feet. Basta took no notice of him. He followed the snuffling dog. A few more steps and Mo would only have to reach out a hand to touch him. Basta unslung the shotgun from his shoulder, stopped and listened. The dogs pulled to the left and jumped up at one of the tree trunks, barking.

Gwin was up there in the branches.

‘What did I say?’ called Flatnose. ‘They’ve scented a marten, that’s all. Those brutes stink so strong even I could pick up their smell!’

‘That’s no ordinary marten!’ hissed Basta. ‘Don’t you recognise him?’ His eyes were fixed on the ruined hovel.

Mo seized his opportunity. He sprang out from behind the tree, seized Basta and tried to wrench the gun from his hands.

‘Get him! Get him, you brutes!’ bellowed Basta, and obviously the dogs were willing to obey him this time. They leaped up at Mo, baring their yellow teeth. Before Meggie could run to his aid Elinor seized her, and held her tight no matter how hard she struggled, just as she had done before back in her own house. But this time there was someone else to help Mo. Before the dogs could get their teeth into him, Dustfinger had grabbed their collars. Meggie thought they would tear him apart when he dragged them off Mo, but instead they licked his hands, jumping up at him like an old friend and almost knocking him down.

But there was still Flatnose. Luckily, he wasn’t too quick on the uptake. That saved them – for a brief moment he simply stood there staring at Basta, who was still struggling in Mo’s grip.

Meanwhile, Dustfinger had hauled the dogs over to the nearest tree, and he was just winding their leashes round the cracked bark when Flatnose came out of his daze.

‘Let them go!’ he bellowed, pointing his shotgun at Mo.

With a suppressed curse, Dustfinger let the dogs loose, but the stone Farid threw moved faster than he did. It hit Flatnose in the middle of the forehead – an insignificant little stone, but the huge man collapsed in the grass at Dustfinger’s feet like a felled tree.

‘Keep the dogs off me!’ called Mo as Basta fought to get control of his gun. One of the dogs had bitten Mo’s sleeve. At least, Meggie hoped it was just his sleeve. Before Elinor could

restrain her again she ran to the big dog and seized its studded collar. The dog wouldn't let go, however hard she pulled. She saw blood on Mo's arm, and she almost got hit on the head with the barrel of Basta's shotgun. Dustfinger tried to call the dogs off, and at first they obeyed him, or at least they let go of Mo, but then Basta succeeded in freeing himself. 'Get him!' he shouted, and the dogs stood there growling, not sure whether to obey Basta or Dustfinger.

'Bloody brutes,' shouted Basta, pointing his shotgun at Mo's chest, but at that very moment Elinor pressed the muzzle of Flatnose's gun against his head. Her hands were shaking, and her face was covered with red blotches as it always was when she was worked up, but she looked more than determined to use the gun.

'Drop it, Basta,' she said, her voice unsteady. 'And not another word to those dogs! I may never have used a gun before but I'm sure I can manage to pull the trigger.'

'Sit!' Dustfinger ordered the dogs. They looked uncertainly at Basta, but when he said nothing they lay down in the grass and let Dustfinger tie them to the tree.

Blood was trickling from Mo's sleeve. Meggie felt herself turn faint at the sight of it. Dustfinger bound up the wound with a red silk scarf that soaked up the blood. 'It's not as bad as it looks,' he assured Meggie, as she came closer, feeling weak at the knees.

'Got anything else in your rucksack that we can use to tie him up?' asked Mo, nodding at the still unconscious Flatnose.

'Our friend with the knife here will need some packaging too,' said Elinor. Basta glared at her viciously. 'Don't stare at me like that,' she said, jamming the barrel of the gun into his chest. 'I'm sure a gun like this can do as much damage as a knife, and believe you me, that gives me some very unpleasant ideas.'

Basta twisted his mouth scornfully, but he never took his eyes off Elinor's forefinger, which was still on the trigger.

There was a length of cord in Dustfinger's rucksack, strong if not particularly thick. 'It won't be enough for both of them,' Dustfinger said.

'Why do you want to tie them up?' enquired Farid. 'Why not kill them? That's what they were going to do to us!'

Meggie looked at him in horror, but Basta laughed. 'Well, fancy that!' he mocked. 'We could have used that boy after all! But who says we were going to kill you? Capricorn wants you alive. Dead men can't read aloud.'

'Oh, really? And weren't you planning to cut off some of my fingers?' asked Dustfinger, tying the cord round Flatnose's legs.

Basta shrugged. 'Since when does a man die of that?'

Elinor jabbed the barrel of the gun into his ribs so hard that he stumbled back. 'Hear that? I think the boy's right. Maybe we really ought to shoot these thugs.'

But of course they didn't. They found a rope in the rucksack that Flatnose had brought with him, and it gave Dustfinger obvious pleasure to tie Basta up. Farid helped him. He clearly knew something about tying up prisoners.

Then they put Basta and Flatnose in the ruined house. 'Nice of us, right? The snakes won't find you quite so soon,' said Dustfinger as they carried Basta through the narrow doorway. 'Of course it'll get pretty hot in here around midday, but maybe someone will have found you by then. We'll let the dogs go. If they have any sense they won't return to the village, but dogs don't often have much sense – so the whole gang will probably be out searching for you by this afternoon at the latest.'

Flatnose did not come round until he was lying beside Basta under the ruined roof. He rolled his eyes furiously and went purple in the face, but neither he nor Basta could utter a sound because Farid had gagged them both, again very expertly.

'Wait a minute,' said Dustfinger, before they left the two men to their fate. 'There's something else – something I've always

wanted to do.’ And to Meggie’s horror he drew Basta’s knife from his belt and went over to the prisoners.

‘What’s the idea?’ asked Mo, barring his way. Obviously the same thought had occurred to him as to Meggie, but Dustfinger only laughed.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to cut a pattern in his face the way he decorated mine,’ he said. ‘I only want to scare him a little.’

And he bent down to cut through the leather thong that Basta wore round his neck. It had a little bag tied with a red drawstring hanging from it. Dustfinger leaned over Basta and swung the bag back and forth in front of his face. ‘I’m taking your luck, Basta!’ he said softly straightening up. ‘Now there’s nothing to protect you from the Evil Eye and the ghosts and demons, black cats and all the other things you’re afraid of.’

Basta tried to kick out with his bound legs, but Dustfinger avoided him easily. ‘This is goodbye for ever, I hope, Basta!’ he said. ‘And if our paths should ever cross again, then I’ll have this.’ He tied the leather thong around his own neck. ‘I expect there’s a lock of your hair in it, right? No? Well, then perhaps I’ll take one. Doesn’t burning someone’s hair have a terrible effect on him?’

‘That’s enough!’ said Mo, urging him away. ‘Let’s get out of here. Who knows when Capricorn will realise these two are missing? By the way, did I tell you that he didn’t burn quite all the books? There’s one copy of *Inkheart* left.’

Dustfinger stopped as suddenly as if a snake had bitten him.

‘I thought I ought to tell you,’ said Mo. ‘Even if it does put stupid ideas in your head.’

Dustfinger just nodded. Then without a word he walked on.

‘Why don’t we take their van?’ suggested Elinor when Mo headed back to the path. ‘They must have left it on the road?’

‘Too dangerous,’ said Dustfinger. ‘How do we know who might be waiting for us down there? And going back to it would take us longer than going on to the nearest village. A van like that is easily spotted, too. Do you want to set Capricorn on our trail?’

Elinor sighed. ‘It was just a thought,’ she murmured, massaging her aching ankles. Then she followed Mo.

They kept to the path, because the snakes were already moving through the tall grass. Once a thin black snake wriggled over the yellow soil in front of them. Dustfinger pushed a stick under its scaly body and threw it back into the thorn bushes. Meggie had expected the snakes to be bigger, but Elinor assured her that the smallest were the most dangerous. Elinor was limping, but she did her best not to hold the others up. Mo too was walking more slowly than usual. He tried to hide it, but the dog-bite obviously hurt.

Meggie walked close to him, and kept looking anxiously at the red scarf Dustfinger had used to bandage the wound. At last they came to a paved road. A truck with a load of rusty gas cylinders was coming towards them. They were too tired to hide, and anyway it wasn’t coming from the direction of Capricorn’s village. Meggie saw the surprised expression of the man at the wheel as he passed them. They must look very disreputable in their dirty clothes, which were drenched with sweat and torn by all the thorn bushes.

Soon afterwards they passed the first houses. There were more and more of them on the slopes now, brightly colour-washed, with flowers growing outside their doors. Trudging on, they came to the outskirts of a fairly large town. Meggie saw multi-storey buildings, palm trees with dusty leaves and suddenly, still far away but shining silver in the sun, a glimpse of the sea.

‘Heavens, I hope they’ll let us into a bank,’ said Elinor. ‘We look as if we’d fallen among thieves.’

‘Well, so we have,’ said Mo.



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22

In Safety

The slow days drifted on, and each left behind a slightly lightened weight of apprehension.

**Mark Twain,
*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer***

They did let Elinor into the bank, despite her torn tights. Before that, however, she had disappeared into the ladies' room of the first café they came to. Meggie never did find out exactly where Elinor hid her valuables, but when she returned her face was washed, her hair not quite as tangled, and she was triumphantly waving a gold credit card in the air. Then she ordered breakfast for everyone.

It was an odd feeling to be suddenly sitting in a café having breakfast, watching perfectly ordinary people outside in the street, going to work, shopping, or just standing about chatting. Meggie could hardly believe they had spent just two nights and a day in Capricorn's village, and that all this – the bustle of ordinary life going on outside the window – hadn't stood still the whole time.

Nonetheless, something had changed. Ever since Meggie had seen Basta hold his knife to Mo's throat it had seemed as if there was a stain on the world, an ugly, dark burn mark still eating its way towards them, stinking and crackling.

Even the most harmless things seemed to be casting suspicious shadows. A woman smiled at Meggie, then stood

looking at the bloody display in a butcher's window. A man pulled a child along after him so impatiently that the little boy stumbled, and cried as he rubbed his grazed knee. And why was that man's jacket bulging over his belt? Was he carrying a knife, like Basta?

Normal life now seemed improbable, unreal. Their flight through the night and the terror she had felt in the ruined house seemed more real to Meggie than the lemonade that Elinor passed over to her.

Farid hardly touched his own glass. He sniffed its yellow contents, took a sip, and went back to looking out of the window. His eyes could hardly decide what to follow first. His head moved back and forth as if he were watching an invisible game and desperately trying to understand its rules.

After breakfast, Elinor asked at the cash desk which was the best hotel in town. While she paid the bill with her credit card, Meggie and Mo examined all the delicacies behind the glass counter. Then, to their surprise, they turned round and found that Dustfinger and Farid had disappeared. Elinor was very worried, but Mo calmed her fears. 'You can't tempt him with a hotel bed. He doesn't like to sleep under any roof,' he said, 'and he's always gone his own way. Perhaps he just wants to get away from here, or perhaps he's round the next corner putting on a performance for tourists. I can assure you he won't go back to Capricorn.'

'What about Farid?' Meggie couldn't believe he had simply run off with Dustfinger.

But Mo only shrugged his shoulders. 'He was sticking close to Dustfinger all the time,' he pointed out. 'Though I don't know whether he or Gwin was the real attraction.'

The hotel recommended to Elinor by the staff in the café was on a square just off the main street that passed right through the town and was lined with palm trees and shops. Elinor took two rooms on the top floor, with balconies that had a view of

the sea. It was a big hotel. A doorman in an elaborate costume stood at the entrance, and although he seemed surprised by their lack of luggage he overlooked their dirty clothes with a friendly smile. The pillows were so soft and white that Meggie had to bury her face in them at once. All the same, the sense of unreality didn't leave her. A part of her was still in Capricorn's village, or trudging through thorns, or cowering in the ruined hovel and trembling as Basta came closer. Mo seemed to feel the same. Whenever she glanced at him there was a distant expression on his face, and instead of the relief she might have expected after all they'd been through, she saw sadness in it – and a thoughtfulness that frightened her.

'You're not thinking of going back, are you?' she asked at last. She knew him very well.

'No, don't worry!' he replied, stroking her hair. But she didn't believe him.

Elinor seemed to share Meggie's fears, for she was to be seen several times talking earnestly to Mo – in the hotel corridor outside her room, at breakfast, at dinner. But she fell silent abruptly as soon as Meggie joined them. Elinor called a doctor to treat Mo's arm, although he didn't think it necessary, and she bought them all new clothes, taking Meggie with her because, as she said, 'If I choose you something myself you won't wear it.' She also did a great deal of telephoning, and visited every bookshop in the town. At breakfast on the third day she suddenly announced that she was going home.

'I've already hired another car,' she said. 'My feet are better now, I'm dying to see my books again, and if I see one more tourist in swimming trunks I shall scream. But before I leave, let me give you this!'

With these words she passed Mo a piece of paper across the table. It had a name and address on it in Elinor's large, bold handwriting. 'I know you, Mortimer!' she said. 'I know you can't get *Inkheart* out of your head. So I've found you Fenoglio's

address. It wasn't easy, I can tell you, but after all there's a fair chance that he still has a few copies. Promise me you'll go to see him – he lives not far from here – and put the copy of the book still in that wretched village out of your mind once and for all.'

Mo stared at the address as if he were learning it off by heart, and then put the piece of paper in his new wallet. 'You're right, it really is worth a try!' he said. 'Thank you very much, Elinor!' He looked almost happy.

Meggie didn't understand any of this. But she knew one thing: she'd been right. Mo was still thinking of *Inkheart*; he couldn't come to terms with losing it.

'Who's Fenoglio?' she asked uncertainly. 'A bookseller or something?' The name seemed familiar, though she couldn't remember where she had heard it. Mo did not reply, but gazed out of the window.

'Let's go back with Elinor, Mo!' said Meggie. 'Please!'

It was nice going down to the sea in the morning, and she liked the brightly coloured houses, but all the same she wanted to leave. Every time she saw the hills rising behind the town her heart beat faster, and she kept thinking she saw Basta's face, or Flatnose's, among the crowds in the streets. She wanted to go home, or at least to Elinor's house. She wanted to watch Mo giving Elinor's books new clothes, pressing fragile gold leaf into the leather with his stamps, choosing endpapers, stirring glue, fastening the press. She wanted everything to be as it had been before the night when Dustfinger turned up.

But Mo shook his head. 'I have to pay this visit first, Meggie,' he said. 'After that we'll go to Elinor's. The day after tomorrow at the latest.'

Meggie stared at her plate. What amazing things you could have for breakfast in an expensive hotel ... but she didn't feel like waffles with fresh strawberries any more.

‘Right, then I’ll see you in a couple of days’ time. Give me your word of honour, Mortimer!’ There was no missing the concern in Elinor’s voice. ‘You’ll come even if you don’t have any luck with Fenoglio. Promise!’

Mo had to smile. ‘My solemn word of honour, Elinor,’ he said.

Elinor heaved a deep sigh of relief and bit into the croissant that had been waiting on her plate all this time. ‘Don’t ask me what I had to do to get hold of that address!’ she said with her mouth full. ‘And in the end the man doesn’t live far from here at all – about an hour’s car journey. Odd that he and Capricorn live so close to one another, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, odd,’ murmured Mo, looking out of the window. The wind blew through the leaves of the palms in the hotel garden.

‘His stories are nearly always set in this region,’ Elinor went on, ‘but I believe he lived abroad for a long time and moved back here only a few years ago.’ She beckoned to a waitress and asked for more coffee.

Meggie shook her head when the waitress asked if she would like anything else.

‘Mo, I don’t want to stay here,’ she said quietly. ‘I don’t want to visit anyone either. I want to go home, or at least back to Elinor’s.’

Mo picked up his coffee cup. It still hurt when he moved his left arm. ‘We’ll get it over with tomorrow, Meggie,’ he said. ‘You heard Elinor – it’s not far away. And by the end of the day after that you’ll be back in Elinor’s huge bed, the one that a whole school class could sleep in.’ He was trying to make her laugh, but Meggie couldn’t. She looked at the strawberries on her plate. How red they were.

‘I’ll have to hire a car too, Elinor,’ said Mo. ‘Can you lend me the money? I’ll pay you back as soon as we meet again.’

Elinor nodded, her gaze lingering on Meggie. ‘You know something, Mortimer?’ she said. ‘I don’t think your daughter is very keen on books just now. I remember the feeling. Whenever my father got so absorbed in a book that we might have been invisible I felt like taking a pair of scissors and cutting it up. And now I’m as mad about them as he was. Oh well, that’s something to think about, eh?’ She folded her napkin and pushed her chair back. ‘I’m going upstairs to pack, and you can tell your daughter who Fenoglio is.’

Then she was gone, leaving Meggie at the table with Mo. He ordered another coffee, even though he usually drank no more than one cup.

‘What about your strawberries?’ he asked. ‘Don’t you want them?’

Meggie shook her head.

Mo sighed, and took one. ‘Fenoglio is the man who wrote *Inkheart*,’ he said. ‘It’s possible that as the author he will still have some copies. Indeed, it’s more than possible, it’s very probable.’

‘Oh, come on!’ said Meggie scornfully. ‘Capricorn’s sure to have stolen them long ago! He stole all the copies – you saw that!’

But Mo shook his head. ‘I don’t believe he will have thought of Fenoglio. You know, it’s a funny thing about writers. Most people don’t stop to think of books being written by people much like themselves. They think that writers are all dead long ago – they don’t expect to meet them in the street, or out shopping. They know their stories but not their names, and certainly not their faces. And most writers like it that way – you heard Elinor say it was quite hard for her to get hold of Fenoglio’s address. Believe me, it’s more than likely that Capricorn has no idea the man who wrote his story lives scarcely two hours’ drive away from him.’

Meggie wasn't so sure. She thoughtfully pleated the tablecloth, then smoothed out the pale yellow fabric again. 'All the same, I'd rather we went to Elinor's house,' she said. 'I don't see why ...' She hesitated, but then finished what she had been going to say. 'I don't see why you want the book so much. It's no use anyway.' My mother's gone, she added in her thoughts. You tried to bring her back but it doesn't work. Let's go home.

Mo helped himself to another of her strawberries, the smallest of all. 'The little ones are always the sweetest,' he said, and put it in his mouth 'Your mother loved strawberries. She couldn't get enough of them, and was always terribly cross if it rained so much in spring that they rotted in her strawberry bed.'

A smile lit up his face as he looked out of the window again. 'Just this one last shot, Meggie,' he said. 'Just this one. And the day after tomorrow we'll go back to Elinor's. I promise.'



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A Night Full of Words

What child unable to sleep on a warm summer night
hasn't thought he saw Peter Pan's sailing ship in the
sky? I will teach you to see that ship.

Roberto Cotroneo,
When a Child on a Summer Morning

Meggie stayed in the hotel while Mo went to the hire-car firm to collect the car he had booked. She took a chair out on to the balcony, looked out over its white-painted railing to the sea shining like blue glass beyond the buildings, and tried to think of nothing, nothing at all. The sound of the traffic drifting up to her was so loud that she almost didn't hear Elinor's knock.

Elinor was already on her way down the corridor when Meggie opened the door. 'Oh, you are there,' Elinor said, coming back and looking rather embarrassed. She was hiding something behind her back.

'Yes, Mo's gone to fetch the hire car.'

'I've got something for you – a goodbye present.' Elinor produced a flat parcel from behind her back. 'It wasn't easy to find a book without any unpleasant characters in it, but I absolutely had to find one your father could read aloud to you without doing any damage. I don't think anything can happen with this one.'

Meggie undid the flower-patterned gift wrapping. The cover of the book showed two children and a dog. The children were kneeling on a narrow piece of rock or stone, looking anxiously down at the abyss yawning beneath them.

‘They’re poems,’ explained Elinor. ‘I don’t know if you like that kind of thing, but I thought that if your father read them aloud they’d sound wonderful.’

Meggie opened the book. She read:

*Oh, if you’re a bird be an early bird
And catch the worm for your breakfast plate.
If you’re a bird, be an early bird
But if you’re a worm, sleep late.*

The words were like a little melody singing to her off the pages. She carefully closed the book. ‘Thank you, Elinor,’ she said. ‘I—I’m sorry I don’t have anything for you.’

‘Oh, and here’s something else you might like,’ said Elinor, taking another little parcel out of her new handbag. ‘Someone who devours books like you should have this one,’ she said. ‘But I think you’d better read it on your own. There are any number of villains in it. All the same, I think you’ll enjoy it. After all, there’s nothing like a few comforting pages of a book when you’re away from home, right?’

Meggie nodded. ‘Mo’s promised we’ll join you the day after tomorrow,’ she said. ‘But you’ll say goodbye to him too before you leave, won’t you?’ She put Elinor’s first present on the chest of drawers near the door and unwrapped the second. Meggie was pleased to see that it was a thick book.

‘Oh, never mind that. You do it for me!’ said Elinor. ‘I’m not good at saying goodbye. Anyway, we’ll be seeing each other again soon – and I’ve already told him to look after you. Oh, and never leave books lying about open,’ she added, before turning round. ‘It breaks their spines. But I expect your father’s told you that a thousand times already.’

‘More often than that,’ said Meggie, but Elinor had already gone. A little later Meggie heard someone dragging a case to the lift, but she didn’t go out into the corridor to see if it was Elinor. She didn’t like goodbyes either.

Meggie was very quiet for the rest of the day. Late in the afternoon Mo took her out for a meal in a little restaurant nearby. Dusk was falling when they came out again, and there were a great many people in the darkening streets. In one square the crowds were particularly dense, and as Meggie pushed her way through them with Mo she saw that they were standing round a fire-eater.

It was very quiet as Dustfinger let the burning torch lick his bare arms. But as soon as he bowed and the audience clapped Farid went round with a little silver dish, which was the only thing that didn’t quite seem to belong in these surroundings. Farid, however, looked much the same as the boys who lounged around on the beach nudging each other when girls passed by. His skin was a little darker, perhaps, and his hair a little blacker, but it would never have occurred to anyone looking at him that he had just slipped out of a story-book in which carpets could fly, mountains could open, and lamps granted wishes. He wore trousers and a T-shirt instead of his blue, full-length robe. He looked older in them. Dustfinger must have bought the clothes for him, as well as the shoes in which he walked very carefully, as if his feet weren’t quite used to them yet. When he saw Meggie in the crowd he gave her a shy nod and passed on quickly.

Dustfinger spat out one last fireball into the air – its size made even the bravest in the audience step back – then he put down the torches and picked up his juggling balls. He threw them so high in the air that the spectators had to tilt their heads right back to watch, then caught them and knocked them up in the air again with his knee. They rolled along his arms as if pulled by invisible threads, emerged from behind his back as if

he had plucked them out of empty air, bounced off his forehead, his chin, such light, weightless, dancing little things ... it would all have seemed easy, cheerful, just a pretty game, if it hadn't been for Dustfinger's face. That remained deadly serious behind the whirling balls, as if it had nothing to do with his dancing hands, nothing to do with their skill, nothing to do with their carefree lightness. Meggie wondered whether his fingers still hurt. They looked red, but perhaps that was just the firelight.

When Dustfinger bowed and put his balls back in the rucksack the spectators were slow to disperse, but finally only Mo and Meggie were left. Farid was sitting on the paving stones counting the money he had collected. He looked happy – as if he had never done anything else in his life.

‘So you're still here,’ said Mo.

‘Why not?’ Dustfinger was collecting his props: the two bottles he had used in Elinor's garden, the burnt-out torches, the bowl into which he spat and whose contents he now tipped carelessly out on the pavement. He had got himself a new bag; the old one was probably still in Capricorn's village. Meggie went over to the rucksack, but Gwin wasn't in it.

‘I'd hoped you'd be well away by now, going back north or somewhere else. Somewhere Basta can't find you.’

Dustfinger shrugged his shoulders. ‘I have to earn some money first. Anyway, I like the weather here better, and the people are more likely to stop and watch. They're generous too. Right, Farid? How much did we make this time?’

The boy jumped when Dustfinger turned to him. Farid had put aside the dish with the money in it and was just about to place a burning matchstick in his mouth. He quickly pinched it out with his fingers. Dustfinger suppressed a smile. ‘He's dead set on learning to play with fire. I've shown him how to make little practice torches, but he's in too much of a hurry. He has blisters on his lips all the time.’

Meggie looked sideways at Farid. He seemed to be ignoring them as he packed Dustfinger's things back in the bag, but she felt sure he was listening to every word they said. She met his eyes twice, those dark eyes, and the second time he turned away so abruptly that he almost dropped one of Dustfinger's bottles.

'Hey, go carefully with that, will you?' snapped Dustfinger impatiently.

'I hope there's no other reason why you're still here?' asked Mo as Dustfinger turned back to him.

'What do you mean?' Dustfinger avoided his gaze. 'Oh, that. You think I might go back for the book. You overestimate me. I'm a coward.'

'Nonsense!' Mo sounded irritated. 'Elinor will be home tomorrow,' he said.

'Nice for her.' Dustfinger looked impassively at Mo's face. 'So why aren't you with her?'

Mo looked at the buildings around them and shook his head. 'There's someone I have to visit first.'

'Here? Who is it?' Dustfinger put on a short-sleeved shirt, a bright garment with a pattern of large flowers. It didn't suit his scarred face.

'There's someone who might still have a copy.'

Dustfinger's face remained unmoved, but his fingers gave him away. They were suddenly having difficulty getting the buttons of his shirt through the buttonholes. 'That's impossible!' he said hoarsely. 'Capricorn would never have overlooked one.'

Mo shrugged. 'Maybe not, but I'm going to try all the same. The man I'm talking about doesn't sell books either new or second-hand. Capricorn probably doesn't even know he exists.'

Dustfinger looked round. Someone was closing the shutters in one of the surrounding houses, and on the other side of the square a few children were playing about among the chairs of a

restaurant until a waiter shooed them away. There was a smell of warm food and the liquid spirits Dustfinger used in his fiery games, but no black-clad man could be seen anywhere, except for the bored-looking waiter who was straightening the chairs.

‘So, who is this mysterious stranger?’ Dustfinger lowered his voice to little more than a whisper.

‘The man who wrote *Inkheart*. He lives not far from here.’

Farid came over to them, holding the silver dish with the money in it. ‘Gwin hasn’t come back,’ he told Dustfinger. ‘And we don’t have anything to tempt him. Shall I buy a couple of eggs?’

‘No, he can look after himself.’ Dustfinger ran a finger over one of his scars. ‘Put the money we’ve taken into the leather bag – you know, the one in my rucksack!’ he told Farid. His voice sounded impatient. Meggie would have given Mo a hurt look if he had spoken to her like that, but Farid didn’t seem to mind. He just hurried off purposefully.

‘I really thought it was all over, no way to get back ever again ...’ Dustfinger broke off and looked up at the sky. A plane crossed the horizon, coloured lights blinking. Farid looked up at it too. He had put the money away and was standing expectantly beside the rucksack. Something furry scuttled across the square, dug its claws into his trouser legs and clambered up to his shoulder. With a smile, Farid dug his hand into his trouser pocket and offered Gwin a piece of bread.

‘Suppose there really is still a copy?’ Dustfinger pushed his long hair back from his forehead. ‘Will you give me another chance? Will you try to read me back into it? Just once?’ There was such longing in his voice that it went to Meggie’s heart.

But Mo’s face was not forthcoming. ‘You can’t go back, not into *that* book!’ he said. ‘I know you don’t want to hear me say so, but it’s the truth, and you’d better resign yourself to it. Perhaps I can help you some other way. I’ve got an idea – rather crazy, but still ...’ He said no more, just shook his head

and kicked an empty matchbox that was lying on the paving stones.

Meggie looked at Mo in surprise. What kind of idea? Did he really have one, or was he just trying to comfort Dustfinger? If so, it hadn't worked. Dustfinger was looking at him with all his old hostility. 'I'm coming,' he said. His fingers had left a little soot on his face when he stroked his scar. 'I'm coming when you go to visit this man. Then we'll see.'

There was loud laughter behind them. Dustfinger looked round. Gwin was trying to climb on to Farid's head, and the boy was laughing as if there were nothing better than to have a marten's sharp claws digging into his scalp.

'Well, *he's* not homesick, anyway,' muttered Dustfinger. 'I asked him. Not homesick in the least! All this,' he added, waving a hand at his surroundings, 'all this appeals to him. Even the noisy, stinking cars. He's glad to be here. You've obviously done him a favour.' The look he gave her father as he said these words was so reproachful that Meggie instinctively reached for Mo's hand.

Gwin had jumped down from Farid's shoulder and was sniffing curiously at the road surface. One of the children who had been romping among the tables bent down and looked incredulously at the little horns. But before the child could put a hand out to touch, Farid quickly intervened, picked Gwin up and put the marten back on his shoulders.

'So where does he live, this—?' Dustfinger did not finish his sentence.

'About an hour's drive from here.'

Dustfinger said nothing. The lights of another plane were blinking up in the sky. 'Sometimes, when I went to the spring to wash early in the morning,' he murmured, 'there'd be tiny fairies flitting about above the water, not much bigger than the butterflies you have here, and blue as violet petals. They liked to fly into my hair. Sometimes they spat in my face. They

weren't very friendly, but they shone like glow-worms by night. I sometimes caught one and put it in a jar. If I let it out at night before going to sleep I had wonderful dreams.'

'Capricorn said there were trolls and giants too,' said Meggie quietly.

Dustfinger gave her a thoughtful look. 'Yes, there were,' he said. 'But Capricorn wasn't particularly fond of them. He'd have liked to do away with them all. He had them hunted. He hunted anything that could run.'

'It must be a dangerous world.' Meggie was trying to imagine it all: the giants, the trolls, and the fairies. Mo had once given her a book about fairies.

Dustfinger shrugged. 'Yes, it's dangerous, so what? This world's dangerous too, isn't it?' Abruptly, he turned his back on Meggie, picked up his rucksack, threw it over his shoulder, then waved to the boy. Farid picked up the bag with the balls and torches, and followed him eagerly. Dustfinger went over to Mo once more.

'Don't you dare tell that man about me!' he said. 'I don't want to see him. I'll wait in the car. I only want to know if he still has a copy of the book, understand?'

Mo shrugged his shoulders. 'As you like.'

Dustfinger inspected his reddened fingers and felt the taut skin. 'He might tell me how my story ends,' he murmured.

Meggie looked at him in astonishment. 'You mean you don't know?'

Dustfinger smiled. Meggie still didn't particularly like his smile. It seemed to appear only to hide something else. 'What's so unusual about that, princess?' he asked quietly. 'Do *you* know how *your* story ends?'

Meggie had no answer to that.

Dustfinger winked at her and turned. 'I'll be at the hotel tomorrow morning,' he said. Then he walked off without

turning back. Farid followed him, carrying the heavy bag, happy as a stray dog who has found a master at last.

That night the full moon hung round and orange in the sky. Before they went to bed, Mo pulled back the curtains so that they could see it – a brightly coloured Chinese lantern among all the white stars.

Neither of them could sleep. Mo had bought a couple of well-worn paperbacks that looked as if they had already passed through the hands of several people. Meggie was reading the book full of unpleasant characters that Elinor had given her. She liked it, but at last her eyes closed with weariness and she fell asleep. Beside her, Mo read on and on while the orange moon shone in the foreign sky outside.

When a confused dream woke her with a start some time in the night, Mo was still sitting up in bed, an open book in his hand. The moon had disappeared long ago, and there was nothing but darkness to be seen through the window.

‘Can’t you sleep?’ asked Meggie, sitting up.

‘It was my left arm that stupid dog bit – and you know I sleep best on my left side. Anyway, there’s too much going around in my head.’

‘There’s a lot going around in my head too.’ Meggie turned to the bedside table and picked up the book of poems that Elinor had given her. She stroked the binding, passed her hand over the curved spine, and traced the letters on the jacket with her forefinger. ‘You know something, Mo?’ she said hesitantly. ‘I think I’d like to be able to do it too.’

‘Do what?’

Meggie stroked the binding of the book again. She thought she could hear the pages whispering, very quietly. ‘Read like that,’ she said. ‘Read aloud the way you do, and make everything come to life.’

Mo looked at her. 'You're out of your mind!' he said. 'That's what has caused all the trouble we're in.'

'I know.'

Mo closed his book, leaving his finger between the pages.

'Read me something aloud, Mo!' said Meggie quietly. 'Please. Just for once.' She offered him the book of poems. 'Elinor gave me this as a present. She said nothing much could happen if you did.'

'Oh, did she?' Mo opened the book. 'Suppose it does, though?' He leafed through the smooth white pages.

Meggie put her pillow close to his.

'Do you really have any idea how you might be able to read Dustfinger back into his story? Or were you making it up?'

'Nonsense. I'm useless at telling lies, as you know.'

'Yes, I do.' Meggie couldn't help smiling. 'Well, what's your idea?'

'I'll tell you when I know if it works.'

Mo was still leafing through Elinor's book. Frowning, he read a page, turned it over and read another.

'Please, Mo!' Meggie moved closer to him. 'Just one poem. A tiny little poem. Please. For me.'

He sighed. 'Just one?'

Meggie nodded.

Outside the noise of the cars had died down. The world was as quiet as if it had spun itself into a cocoon, like a moth preparing itself to slip out in the morning, young again and good as new.

'Please, Mo, read to me!' said Meggie.

So Mo began filling the silence with words. He lured them out of the pages as if they had only been waiting for his voice, words long and short, words sharp and soft, cooing, purring words. They danced through the room, painting stained-glass

pictures, tickling the skin. Even when Meggie nodded off she could still hear them, although Mo had closed the book long ago. Words that explained the world to her, its dark side and its light side, words that built a wall to keep out bad dreams. And not a single bad dream came over the wall for the rest of that night.

Next morning, a bird flew down and perched on Meggie's bed, a bird as orange as the light of last night's moon. She tried to catch it, but it flew away to the window where the blue sky was waiting for it. It collided with the invisible glass again and again, bumping its tiny head, until Mo opened the window and let it out.

'Well, do you still wish you could do it?' asked Mo when Meggie had watched the bird fly away until it merged with the blue of the sky.

'It was beautiful!' she said.

'Yes, but will it like this world?' asked Mo. 'And what's gone to replace it in the world it came from?'

Meggie stayed by the window as Mo went downstairs to pay their bill. She remembered the last poem that Mo had read before she fell asleep. She picked up the book from her bedside table, hesitated for a moment – and opened it.

*There is a place where the sidewalk ends
And before the street begins,
And there the grass grows soft and white,
And there the sun burns crimson bright,
And there the moon-bird rests from his flight
To cool in the peppermint wind.*

Meggie whispered the words aloud as she read them, but no moon-bird flew down from the lamp. And she must be just imagining the smell of peppermint.



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24

Fenoglio

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.

**Mark Twain,
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

Dustfinger and Farid were waiting for them in the car park when they left the hotel. Over the nearby hills, a warm wind was slowly driving rain-clouds towards the sea. Everything seemed grey today, even the houses with their bright colour-washed walls and the flowering shrubs in the streets. Mo took the coastal road, which Elinor had said was built by the Romans, and followed it further west.

All through the drive the sea lay to their left, its water stretching to the horizon, sometimes hidden by houses, sometimes by trees, but this morning it didn't look half as inviting as it had on the day when Meggie had come down from the mountains with Elinor and Dustfinger. The grey of the sky cast a dull reflection on the blue waves, and the sea-spray foamed like dirty dishwater. Several times, Meggie found her gaze wandering to the hills on her right. Capricorn's village was hidden somewhere among them. Once she even thought she

saw its pale church tower in a dark fold of the hills, and her heart beat faster, although she knew that it couldn't possibly be Capricorn's church. Her feet remembered all too well how long that endless journey down the mountainside had been.

Mo was driving faster than usual, much faster. He could obviously hardly wait to reach their destination. After a good hour they turned off the coast road and followed a narrow, winding lane through a valley grey with buildings. Glasshouses covered the hills here, their panes painted white for protection against the sun that was now hidden behind clouds. Only when the road went uphill did the country on both sides turn green again. The buildings gave way to natural meadowland, and stunted olive trees lined the road, which forked unexpectedly a couple of times. Mo had to keep consulting the map he had bought, but finally the right name appeared on a sign.

They drove into a small village, little more than a square, a few dozen houses, and a church that looked very much like Capricorn's. When Meggie got out of the car she saw the sea far below. The waves were so rough on this overcast day that, even from this distance, she could see the breakers. Mo had parked in the village square beside the memorial for the dead of two world wars. The list of names was long for such a small place. Meggie thought there were almost as many names as the village had houses.

'You can leave the car unlocked. I'll keep an eye on it,' said Dustfinger, as Mo was about to lock up. He threw his rucksack over his shoulder, put the sleepy Gwin on his chain, and sat on the steps in front of the war memorial. Farid sat down beside him without a word. Meggie looked uneasily at them both as she followed Mo.

'Remember, you promised not to mention me!' Dustfinger called after them.

'Yes, all right!' replied Mo.

Farid was playing with matches again. Meggie caught him at it when she looked round once more. By now he could extinguish the burning matches with his mouth quite well, but all the same Dustfinger took the box of matches away from him, and Farid looked sadly at his empty hands.

Meggie had met many people who loved books, sold them, collected them, printed them or, like her father, prevented them from falling apart, but she had never before met anyone who wrote the words that filled all a book's pages. She didn't even know the names of the authors of some of her favourite stories, let alone what they looked like. She had seen only the characters who emerged from the words to meet her, never the writer who had made them up. It was just as Mo had said: in general one thought of writers as dead or very, very old. But the man who opened the door to them, after Mo had rung the bell twice, was neither. That is, he was certainly quite old, at least in Meggie's eyes: in his mid-sixties or even older. His face was wrinkled like a turtle's, but his hair was black, without a trace of grey (she was to find out later that he dyed it), and he didn't look at all fragile. On the contrary: he planted himself so impressively in the doorway that Meggie was instantly tongue-tied. Luckily Mo was not.

'Signor Fenoglio?' he asked.

'Yes?' The face looked less forthcoming than ever. There was disapproval in every line of it. But Mo seemed undaunted.

'I'm Mortimer Folchart,' he introduced himself, 'and this is my daughter Meggie. I'm here about one of your books.'

A boy appeared at the door beside Fenoglio, a little boy of about five, and a small girl joined them on the other side of the doorway. She stared curiously, first at Mo, then at Meggie. 'Pippo's picked the chocolate chips out of the cake,' Meggie heard her whisper as she looked anxiously up at Mo. When his eyes twinkled at her she disappeared behind Fenoglio's back, giggling. But Fenoglio himself still looked anything but friendly.

‘All the chocolate chips?’ he growled. ‘Very well, I’m coming. You go and tell Pippo he’s in serious trouble.’ The little girl nodded and ran away, obviously happy to be the bearer of bad news. The small boy clung to Fenoglio’s leg.

‘A very particular book,’ Mo went on. ‘*Inkheart*. You wrote it quite a long time ago, and unfortunately I can’t buy a copy anywhere now.’ With the man’s icy stare still resting on her father, Meggie could only marvel that the words didn’t freeze on Mo’s lips.

‘Oh yes. So?’ Fenoglio crossed his arms. The girl appeared on his left again. ‘Pippo’s hiding,’ she said.

‘That won’t do him any good,’ said Fenoglio. ‘I can always find him.’ The little girl scurried off again. Meggie heard her in the house, calling to the chocolate thief. Fenoglio, however, turned back to Mo. ‘So what do you want? If you’re planning to ask me clever questions of some kind about the book, forget it. I don’t have time for that sort of thing. Anyway, as you said yourself, I wrote it ages ago.’

‘No, there’s only one question I was going to ask. I’d like to know if you still have any copies, and if so may I buy one from you?’

The old man’s expression was no longer quite so forbidding as he inspected Mo. ‘How extraordinary. You must be really keen on the book,’ he murmured. ‘I’m flattered. Although,’ he added, and his face darkened again, ‘I hope you’re not one of those idiots who collect rare books just because they’re rare, are you?’

Mo couldn’t help smiling. ‘No,’ he said. ‘I want to read it, that’s all. I just want to read it.’

Fenoglio braced an arm against the door frame and looked at the house opposite as if he feared it might collapse at any moment. The street where he lived was so narrow that Mo could have touched both sides at once if he stretched his arms out. Many of the houses were built of coarse blocks of sandy

grey stone, like the houses in Capricorn's village, but here there were flowers in window boxes and pots of plants on the steps, and many of the shutters looked as if they had been freshly painted. There was a pram outside one house, a moped leaning against the wall of another, and voices floated into the street from open windows. Capricorn's village probably looked like this once, thought Meggie.

An old woman passing by looked suspiciously at the strangers. Fenoglio nodded to her, murmured a brief greeting, and waited until she had vanished behind a green-painted front door. '*Inkheart*,' he said. 'That really is a long time ago. And it's odd that you should be asking about that one, of all my books.'

The girl came back. She tugged Fenoglio's sleeve and whispered something in his ear. Fenoglio's turtle face twisted in a smile. Meggie liked him better that way. 'Oh, that's where he always hides, Paula,' he told the little girl softly. 'Perhaps you should advise him to try a better hiding-place.'

Paula ran off for the fourth time, but not before gazing curiously at Meggie first.

'Well, you'd better come in,' said Fenoglio. Without another word he showed Mo and Meggie into the house, went down a dark, narrow passage ahead of them, limping because the little boy was still clinging to his leg like a monkey, and pushed open the door to the kitchen, where the ruins of a cake stood on the table. Its brown icing was as full of holes as the binding of a book when bookworms have been gnawing at it for years.

'Pippo?' Fenoglio bellowed so loud that even Meggie jumped, although she didn't feel guilty of any naughtiness. 'I know you can hear me. And I warn you I shall tie a knot in your nose for every hole in this cake. Understand?'

Meggie heard a giggle. It seemed to come from the cupboard next to the fridge. Fenoglio broke a piece off the cake with the holes still in it. 'Paula,' he said, 'give this girl a slice if she

doesn't mind the missing chocolate.' Paula emerged from under the table and looked enquiringly at Meggie.

'I don't mind,' said Meggie, whereupon Paula took a huge knife, cut an enormous piece of cake, and put it on the table in front of her.

'Pippo, let's have one of the rose-patterned plates,' said Fenoglio, and a hand stuck out of the cupboard holding a plate in its chocolate-brown fingers. Meggie was quick to take the plate before it dropped, and put the piece of cake on it.

'What about you?' Fenoglio asked Mo.

'I'd prefer the book,' said Mo. He was looking rather pale.

Fenoglio removed the little boy from his leg and sat down. 'Go and find another tree to climb, Rico,' he said. Then he looked thoughtfully at Mo. 'I'm afraid I can't help you,' he said. 'I don't have a single copy left. They were stolen, all of them. I lent them to an exhibition of old children's books in Genoa: a lavishly illustrated special edition, a copy with a signed dedication by the illustrator, and the two copies that belonged to my own children with all their scribbled comments – I always asked them to mark the bits they liked best – and finally my own personal copy. Every last one of them was stolen two days after the exhibition opened.'

Mo ran a hand over his face as if he could wipe the disappointment off it. 'Stolen,' he said. 'Of course.'

'Of *course*?' Fenoglio narrowed his eyes and looked at Mo with great curiosity. 'You'll have to explain. In fact I'm not letting you out of my house until I find out why you're interested in this of all my books. In fact, I might set the children on you – and you wouldn't like that!'

Mo tried for a smile, without much success. 'My copy was stolen as well,' he said at last. 'And that was a very special edition too.'

‘Extraordinary.’ Fenoglio raised his eyebrows, which were like hairy caterpillars creeping above his eyes. ‘Come on, let’s hear your story.’ All the hostility had vanished from his face. Curiosity, pure curiosity, had won out. In Fenoglio’s eyes Meggie saw the same insatiable hunger for a good story that overcame her at the sight of any new and exciting book.

‘There’s not much to tell,’ said Mo. Meggie heard in his voice that he didn’t intend to tell the old man the truth. ‘I restore books. That’s how I make my living. I found yours in a second-hand bookshop some years ago, and I was going to give it a new binding and then sell it, but I liked it so much I kept it instead. And now it’s been stolen and I’ve been trying in vain to buy another copy. A friend who knows a great deal about rare books and how to get hold of them finally suggested I might try the author himself. She was the person who found me your address. So I came here.’

Fenoglio wiped a few cake crumbs off the table. ‘Fine,’ he said, ‘but that’s not the whole story.’

‘What do you mean?’

The old man scrutinised Mo’s face until he turned his head away and looked out of the narrow kitchen window. ‘I mean I can smell a good story miles away, so don’t try keeping one from me. Out with it! And then you can have a piece of this magnificently perforated cake.’

Paula clambered up on to Fenoglio’s lap, nestled her head under his chin, and looked at Mo as expectantly as the old man himself.

But Mo shook his head. ‘No, I think I’d better say no more. You wouldn’t believe a word of it anyway.’

‘Oh, I’d believe all manner of things!’ Fenoglio assured Mo, cutting him a slice of cake. ‘I’d believe any story at all just so long as it’s well told.’

The cupboard door opened a crack, and Meggie saw a boy’s head emerge. ‘What about my punishment?’ he asked. Judging

by the fingers, which were sticky with chocolate, this must be Pippo.

‘Later,’ said Fenoglio. ‘I have something else to do now.’

Disappointed, Pippo came out of the cupboard. ‘You said you were going to tie knots in my nose.’

‘Double knots, seaman’s knots, butterfly knots, any knots you fancy, but I have to hear this story first. So go and fool about with something else until I have time for you.’

Pippo stuck his lower lip out sulkily and disappeared into the corridor. Rico, the little boy, ran after him.

Mo remained silent, pushing cake crumbs off the worn tabletop, drawing invisible patterns on the wood with his forefinger. ‘There’s someone in this story, and I’ve promised not to tell you about him,’ he said at last.

‘Keeping a bad promise makes it no better,’ said Fenoglio. ‘Or at least so a favourite book of mine says.’

‘I don’t know if it was a bad promise.’ Mo sighed, and looked up at the ceiling as if the answer might be found there. ‘Very well,’ he said. ‘I’ll tell you. But Dustfinger will murder me if he finds out.’

‘Dustfinger? I once called a character that. Oh yes, of course, the poor trickster in *Inkheart*. I killed him off in the last chapter but one. A very touching scene. I cried while I was writing it.’

Meggie almost choked on the piece of cake she had just put in her mouth, but Fenoglio went on calmly. ‘I haven’t killed off many of my characters, but sometimes it just happens. Death scenes aren’t easy to write – they can too easily get sentimental – but I thought I did pretty well with Dustfinger’s death.’

Horrified, Meggie looked at Mo. ‘He dies? Did – did you know that?’

‘Yes, of course. I’ve read the whole story, Meggie.’

‘But why didn’t you tell him?’

‘He didn’t want to know.’

Fenoglio was following this exchange with a puzzled look on his face – and with great curiosity.

‘Who kills him?’ asked Meggie. ‘Basta?’

‘Ah, Basta!’ Fenoglio smiled. Each of his separate wrinkles expressed self-satisfaction. ‘One of the best villains I ever thought up. A rabid dog, but not half as bad as my other dark hero, Capricorn. Basta would let his heart be torn out for Capricorn, but his master is a stranger to such loyalty. He feels nothing, nothing at all, he doesn’t even enjoy his own cruelty. Yes, I really did think up some pretty dark characters for *Inkheart*, and then there’s the Shadow, Capricorn’s hound, as I always called him to myself. Though of course that’s far too friendly a name for such a monster.’

‘The Shadow?’ Meggie’s voice was hardly more than a whisper. ‘Does *he* kill Dustfinger?’

‘No, no. I’m sorry, I’d quite forgotten your question. Once I begin talking about my characters it’s hard to stop me. No, one of Capricorn’s men kills Dustfinger. It was a very successful scene. Dustfinger has some kind of tame marten. Capricorn’s man wants to kill it because he enjoys killing small animals, so Dustfinger tries to save his furry friend and dies in the attempt.’

Meggie said nothing. Poor Dustfinger, she thought. Poor, poor Dustfinger. She couldn’t think of anything else. ‘Which of Capricorn’s men does it?’ she asked. ‘Flatnose? Or Cockerell?’

Fenoglio looked at her in surprise. ‘Well, fancy that. You know all their names? I usually forget them soon after I’ve made them up.’

‘It’s neither of them, Meggie,’ said Mo. ‘The murderer’s name isn’t even mentioned in the book. A whole pack of Capricorn’s men is hunting Gwin, and one of them draws a knife and uses it. A man who’s probably still waiting for Dustfinger.’

‘Waiting for him?’ Fenoglio looked at Mo, confused.

‘That’s terrible!’ whispered Meggie. ‘I’m glad I didn’t read any more.’

‘What do you mean? Are you talking about my book?’ Fenoglio’s voice sounded hurt.

‘Yes,’ said Meggie. ‘I am.’ She looked at Mo, a question in her eyes. ‘And Capricorn? Who kills him?’

‘No one.’

‘No one!’

Meggie stared at Fenoglio so accusingly that he rubbed his nose awkwardly. It was an impressive nose. ‘Why are you looking at me like that?’ he cried. ‘Yes, I let him get away with it. He’s one of my best villains. How could I kill him off? It’s the same in real life: notorious murderers get off scot-free and live happily all their lives, while good people die – sometimes the very best people. That’s the way of the world. Why should it be different in books?’

‘What about Basta? Does he stay alive too?’ Meggie remembered what Farid had said back in the ruined hovel: ‘Why not kill them? That’s what they were going to do to us!’

‘Basta stays alive too,’ replied Fenoglio. ‘I remember toying for some time with the idea of writing a sequel to *Inkheart*, and I didn’t want to do without those two. I was proud of them! And the Shadow was quite a success too, yes, he really was, but I’m always most attached to my human characters. You know, if you were to ask me which of those two I was prouder of, Basta or Capricorn, I couldn’t tell you! Even though some critics said they were just *too* nasty!’

Mo stared out of the window again. Then he looked at Fenoglio. ‘Would you like to meet them?’ he asked.

‘Meet who?’ Fenoglio looked at him in surprise.

‘Capricorn and Basta.’

‘Good God, no!’ Fenoglio laughed so loud that Paula, quite frightened, put her hand over his mouth.

‘Well, we did,’ said Mo wearily. ‘Meggie and I – and Dustfinger.’



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25

The Wrong Ending

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR

per

G.G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE

**Mark Twain,
*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

Fenoglio said nothing for a long time after Mo had finished his story. Paula had gone off long ago in search of Pippo and Rico. Meggie heard them running over the wooden floorboards above her, back and forth, jumping, sliding, giggling and squealing. But in Fenoglio's kitchen it was so quiet you could hear the tick of the clock on the wall by the window.

'Does he have those scars on his face? I expect you know what I mean? The fairies treated the cuts – that's why there are only slight scars left, little more than three pale lines on the skin, is that right?' Fenoglio looked enquiringly at Mo, who nodded.

Fenoglio looked out of the window again, brushing a few crumbs off his trousers. 'Basta scarred him,' he said. 'They both fancied the same girl.'

Mo nodded. 'Yes, I know.'

A window was open in the house opposite, and you could hear a woman scolding a child inside. 'I suppose I ought to feel very, very proud,' murmured Fenoglio. 'Every writer wants to create lifelike characters – and mine are so lifelike they've walked straight off the page!'

'That's because my father read them out of the book,' said Meggie. 'He can do it with other books too.'

'Yes, of course.' Fenoglio nodded. 'A good thing you reminded me. Otherwise I might start taking myself for a minor god, mightn't I? But I'm sorry about your mother – although depending on how you look at it, that wasn't really my fault.'

'It's worse for my father,' said Meggie. 'I don't remember her.'

Mo looked at her, startled.

'Of course not. You were younger than my grandchildren,' said Fenoglio thoughtfully. 'I'd really like to see him,' he added. 'Dustfinger, I mean. Naturally I'm sorry now that I thought up such an unhappy ending for the poor fellow, but it somehow seemed right for him. As Shakespeare puts it so well, "Everybody plays his part, and mine is a sad one."' He looked out into the street. Something fell and broke on the floor above them, but Fenoglio didn't seem particularly interested.

'Are those your children?' asked Meggie, pointing up at the ceiling.

'Heaven help us, no. My grandchildren. One of my daughters lives in this village too. They're always visiting me, and I tell them stories. I tell half the village stories, but I don't feel like writing them down any more.' He turned to Mo with an enquiring look. 'Where is he now?'

'Dustfinger? I can't tell you. He doesn't want to see you.'

'He got quite a shock when my father told him about you,' added Meggie. But Dustfinger must be told what happens to him, she thought, he *must*. Then he'll understand why he really

can't go back. And all the same, she thought next, he'll still be homesick. Homesick for ever.

'I must see him! Only once. Don't you understand?' Fenoglio looked pleadingly at Mo. 'I could just follow you, inconspicuously. How would he know who I am? I want to find out if he really looks the way I imagined him, that's all.'

However, Mo shook his head. 'I think you'd better leave him alone.'

'Nonsense. Surely I can see him whenever I like. After all, I invented him!'

'And you killed him off,' Meggie pointed out.

'Well.' Fenoglio raised his hands helplessly. 'I wanted to make the story more exciting. Don't you like exciting stories?'

'Only if they have happy endings.'

'Happy endings!' Fenoglio snorted scornfully, and then listened to what was going on upstairs. Something or someone had landed heavily on the wooden floorboards. Loud howls followed the thud. Fenoglio strode to the door. 'Wait here! I'll be back in a minute!' he called, disappearing into the corridor.

'Mo!' whispered Meggie. 'You've got to tell Dustfinger! You've got to tell him he can't go back.'

But Mo shook his head. 'He won't want to listen, I promise you. I've tried more than a dozen times. Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea to bring him together with Fenoglio after all. He might well be more likely to believe his creator than me.' With a sigh, he brushed a few cake crumbs off Fenoglio's kitchen table. 'There was a picture in *Inkheart*,' he murmured, raising the palm of his hand over the table-top as if to conjure up the picture itself. 'It showed a group of women standing under an arched gateway, in splendid clothes as if they were going to a party. One of them had hair as fair as your mother's. You can't see the woman's face in the picture, she has her back turned, but I always imagined it was her. Crazy, isn't it?'

Meggie placed her hand on his. 'Mo, promise you won't go back to the village!' she said. 'Please! Promise me you won't try to get the book back.'

The second hand on Fenoglio's kitchen clock was dividing time into painfully small segments.

At last Mo answered. 'I promise,' he said.

'Look at me and say it!'

He did. 'I promise!' he repeated. 'There's just one more thing I want to discuss with Fenoglio, and then we'll go home and forget about the book. Happy now?'

Meggie nodded. Although she wondered what else there could be to discuss.

Fenoglio returned with a tearful Pippo on his back. The other two children followed their grandfather, looking crestfallen. 'Holes in the cake and now a dent in his forehead too. I think I ought to send the lot of you home!' Fenoglio told them crossly as he put Pippo down on a chair. Then he rummaged around in the big cupboard until he found a plaster, which he stuck none too gently on his grandson's cut forehead.

Mo pushed his chair back and stood up. 'I've changed my mind,' he said. 'I'll take you to Dustfinger after all.'

Fenoglio turned to him in surprise.

'Perhaps *you* can make it clear to him once and for all that he can't go back,' Mo continued. 'Goodness knows what he might do next! I'm afraid it could be dangerous for him – and I do have this idea, rather a weird idea, but I'd like to talk to you about it.'

'Weirder than what I've heard already? I'd say that's hardly possible!' Fenoglio's grandchildren had disappeared into the cupboard again. Giggling, they closed the doors. 'Very well, I'll listen to your idea,' said Fenoglio. 'But I want to see Dustfinger first!'

Mo looked at Meggie. It wasn't often that he broke a promise, and he clearly felt far from comfortable about it. Meggie could understand that only too well. 'He's waiting in the square,' said Mo hesitantly. 'But let me talk to him first.'

'In the square here?' Fenoglio's eyes widened. 'That's wonderful!' With one stride he was standing in front of the little mirror hanging next to the kitchen door, running his fingers through his black hair almost as if he were afraid Dustfinger might be disappointed by his creator's appearance. 'I'll pretend I don't see him until you call me,' he said. 'Yes, that's the thing to do.'

There was a clattering in the cupboard, and Pippo stumbled out in a jacket that came down to his ankles and a hat so large that it had slipped right over his eyes.

'Of course!' Fenoglio took the hat off Pippo's head and put it on his own. 'That's it! I'll take the children with me. A grandfather with three grandchildren – nothing about that sight to make anyone uneasy, is there?'

Mo just nodded and pushed Meggie out into the narrow passage.

As they walked down the street leading back to the square and their car, Fenoglio followed a few metres behind them, with his grandchildren running and jumping around him like three puppies.



26

Shivers Down the Spine and a Foreboding

And that's when she put her book down. And looked at me. And said it: 'Life isn't fair, Bill. We tell our children that it is, but it's a terrible thing to do. It's not only a lie, it's a cruel lie. Life is not fair, and it never has been, and it's never going to be.'

William Goldman,
The Princess Bride

Dustfinger sat on the chilly stone steps, waiting. He felt sick with fear; but he wasn't quite sure of what. Perhaps the war memorial behind him reminded him too much of death. He had always been afraid of death, which he imagined as cold, like a night without fire. Now, however, he dreaded something else even more. Its name was sorrow, and it had been stalking him like a second shadow ever since Silvertongue lured him into this world. Sorrow that made his limbs heavy and turned the sky grey.

Beside him, the boy was running up and down the steps. Up and down, tirelessly, with light feet and a cheerful face, as if Silvertongue had read him straight into Paradise. What could be making him so happy? Dustfinger looked round at the narrow houses, pale yellow, pink, peach, the dark green shutters at the windows and the rust-red tiles on the roofs, an oleander

flowering in front of a wall as if its branches were on fire, cats stalking past the warm walls. Farid stole up to one of them, stroked its grey fur and put it on his lap, although it dug its claws into his thighs.

‘You know what people do to keep the numbers of cats down around here?’ Dustfinger stretched his legs and blinked up at the sun. ‘When winter comes they take their own cats indoors for safety, then they put out dishes of poisoned food for the strays.’

Farid still fondled the grey cat’s pointed ears. But his face was rigid and grim, not a trace left of the happiness that had just made it look so soft and open. Dustfinger glanced quickly aside. Why had he said that? Had the happiness on the boy’s face upset him so much?

Farid let the cat go and climbed the steps to the memorial.

He was still sitting there on the wall, legs drawn up, when the other two came back. Silvertongue had no book with him, and he looked strained – his guilty conscience was clearly visible on his face.

Why? What could have made Silvertongue look so guilty? Dustfinger glanced suspiciously around without knowing quite what he was looking for. Silvertongue’s face always showed his feelings; he was an open book that any stranger could read. His daughter was different. It wasn’t so easy to make out what was going on in her mind. But now, as she came towards him, Dustfinger thought he saw something like concern in her eyes, perhaps even pity ... What had that writer fellow said to make the girl look at him like that?

He got up and brushed the dust off his trousers.

‘No copies left, am I right?’ he asked, when the two of them had reached him.

‘You’re right. They’ve all been stolen,’ Silvertongue replied. ‘Years ago.’

His daughter never took her eyes off Dustfinger.

‘Why are you staring at me like that, princess?’ he snapped. ‘Do you know something I don’t?’

Bull’s-eye. An accidental one, too. He hadn’t wanted to score a bull’s-eye at all, certainly not a direct hit on an uncomfortable truth. The girl bit her lip, still looking at him with that same mixture of pity and concern.

Dustfinger rubbed his hand over his face, feeling his scars on it like a picture postcard saying ‘Greetings from Basta’. He could never forget Capricorn’s rabid dog for a single day even if he wanted to. ‘To help you please the girls even better in future!’ Basta had hissed in his ear before wiping the blood off his knife.

‘Oh, curse it all!’ Dustfinger kicked the nearest wall so hard that he felt the pain in his foot for days to come. ‘You’ve told that writer about me!’ he accused Mo. ‘And now even your daughter knows more about me than I do! Very well, out with it! I want to know now too. Tell me. You always wanted to tell me, after all. Basta hangs me, is that it? Strings me up and tightens the noose until I’m dead as a doornail, right? But why should that bother me? Basta’s in this world now, isn’t he? The story’s changed – it must have changed. Basta can’t hurt me if you just send me back there where I belong!’

Dustfinger took a step towards Silvertongue as if to grab him, shake him, take out on him all that had been done to himself, but Meggie came between them. ‘Stop it! It’s not Basta!’ she cried, pushing him away. ‘It’s one of Capricorn’s men, and he’s waiting for you in the book. They want to kill Gwin and you try to help him, so they kill you instead! Nothing about that has changed! It will simply happen and there’s nothing you can do about it. Do you understand? You *must* stay here, you can’t go back, ever!’

Dustfinger stared at the girl as if he could shut her up that way, but she held his gaze. She even tried to take his hand.

‘You should be glad to be here!’ she faltered as he retreated from her. ‘You can escape from them here. You can go away, far away, and ...’ Her voice quivered. Perhaps she had seen the tears in Dustfinger’s eyes. Angrily, he wiped them away with his sleeve, and looked round like an animal in a trap, searching for some way out. But there *was* no way out. No going forward and, even worse, no going back.

A trio of women standing at the bus stop glanced curiously in his direction. Dustfinger often attracted such glances; anyone could see he didn’t belong here. A stranger for ever.

Three children and an old man were playing football with a tin can on the other side of the square. Farid looked at them. The Arab boy had Dustfinger’s rucksack over his narrow shoulders, and grey cat hairs clung to his trousers. He was deep in thought, wriggling his bare toes into the gaps between the paving stones. He was always taking off the trainers Dustfinger had bought him and going about barefoot, even on hot tarmac, with his shoes tied to the rucksack like loot he was taking home.

Silvertongue looked at the playing children too. Had he given some sign to the old man with them? The old fellow left the children and came over. Dustfinger took a step back. A shiver ran down his spine.

‘My grandchildren have been admiring the tame marten that boy has on a chain,’ said the old man, as he approached.

Dustfinger took another step backwards. Why was the dark-haired man looking at him like that? In quite a different way from the women at the bus stop. ‘The children say the marten can do tricks and the boy’s a fire-eater. Perhaps we could come to the show and watch at close quarters?’

The cold shiver spread right through Dustfinger, although the sun was shining down on him. The way the old man looked at him – as if he were a dog who had run away long ago and was

now back, tail between his legs, perhaps with lice in his coat, but definitely his, the old man's dog.

'Nonsense, we don't do tricks!' he managed to say. 'There's nothing to see here!' He retreated again, but the old man followed him – as if they were linked by an invisible thread.

'I'm sorry,' said the old man, raising a hand as if to touch Dustfinger's scarred face.

Dustfinger's back came up against a parked car. Now the old man was standing right in front of him, and still staring, staring —

'Go away!' Dustfinger pushed him roughly back. 'Farid, bring me my things!' The boy hurried to his side. Dustfinger snatched the rucksack from his hand, picked up the marten and stowed him in the rucksack, taking no notice of the animal's sharp, snapping teeth. The old man stared at Gwin's horns. Fingers flying, Dustfinger slung the rucksack over his shoulder and tried to push past him.

'Please. I only want to talk to you.' The old man barred his way, reaching for his arm.

'Well, I don't want to talk to *you*.' Dustfinger tried to free himself from the bony fingers. They were surprisingly strong, but Dustfinger had the knife, Basta's flick-knife. He took it out of his pocket, snapped it open and held it under the old man's chin. His hand was trembling, he had never enjoyed threatening anyone with a knife, but the old man let go. And Dustfinger ran.

He ignored whatever Silvertongue was calling after him. He just ran for it, as he had often done in the past. He could trust his legs even if he didn't yet know where they were taking him. He left the village and the road behind, dodged under some trees, ran through wild grass, plunged in among the mustard-yellow gorse bushes, let the silvery foliage of the olive trees hide him ... he had to get away from the houses, away from the paved roads. Wild country had always protected him. Only

when every breath he drew hurt him did he throw himself down into the long grass behind an abandoned cistern where frogs croaked and the rainwater that had collected among the grey stones steamed in the sun. He lay there gasping, listening to his own heartbeat and staring at the sky.

He jumped. 'Who's that?'

The boy stood there. Farid had followed him.

'Go away!' shouted Dustfinger.

The boy crouched down among the wild flowers that grew everywhere – blue and yellow and red splashes of bright colour in the grass.

'I don't want you!' snapped Dustfinger.

The boy said nothing, but picked a wild orchid and examined the bloom. It looked like a bumble-bee on the tip of a flower stem. 'What a strange flower!' he murmured. 'I've never seen one like that before.'

Dustfinger sat up and leaned against the side of the cistern. 'You'll be sorry if you keep running after me,' he said. 'I'm going back. You know where to.'

Only when he said it did he realise that he had made up his mind – long ago. Yes, he was going back. Dustfinger the coward was going back into the lion's den. Never mind what Silvertongue said, or what his daughter thought – there was only one thing he wanted. He had never wanted anything else. And if he couldn't have it now, then at least he could hope that one day his wish would come true.

The boy stayed sitting there.

'Go away, will you? Go back to Silvertongue! He'll look after you.'

Farid sat there unmoved, his arms round his knees. 'You're going back to that village?'

'Yes, the village where the devils and demons live. Believe me, they'll kill a boy like you and eat you for breakfast. They'll

enjoy their coffee all the more afterwards.'

Farid stroked his cheeks with the orchid. He made a face as the petals tickled his skin. 'Gwin wants to get out,' he said.

He was right. The marten was biting the fabric of the rucksack and sticking his muzzle out of it. Dustfinger undid the straps and freed him. Gwin blinked up at the sun, chattered crossly, presumably complaining that it was the wrong time of day, and scurried over to the boy. Farid picked him up, put him on his shoulder, and looked earnestly at Dustfinger. 'I've never seen flowers like this,' he repeated. 'Or such green hills or such a clever marten. But I know a lot about the kind of men you mean. They're the same everywhere.'

Dustfinger shook his head. 'These are particularly bad.'

'No, not *particularly*.'

The defiance in Farid's voice made Dustfinger laugh; he himself didn't know why.

'We could go somewhere else,' said the boy.

'No, we couldn't.'

'Why not? What are you planning to do in that village?'

'Steal something,' said Dustfinger.

The boy nodded, as if stealing were the most natural plan in the world, and carefully put the orchid in his trouser pocket. 'Will you teach me a little more about fire first? Before we go there.'

'Before?' Dustfinger couldn't help smiling. The boy was a clever lad, and no doubt he knew there wouldn't be any *after*.

'Of course,' he said. 'I'll teach you everything I know. Before we go there.'



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27

A Good Place To Stay

I keep six honest serving men (they taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
and How and Where and Who.

Rudyard Kipling,
The Elephant's Child

They did not set off to join Elinor after Dustfinger had left them. 'Meggie, I know I promised we would,' said Mo, as they stood in the square in front of the war memorial, feeling rather at a loss. 'But I'd like to leave the journey until tomorrow. As I told you before, there's something else I have to discuss with Fenoglio.'

The old man was still standing where he had been when he spoke to Dustfinger, staring down the road. His grandchildren were pulling at him and talking to him, but he didn't seem to notice them.

'What exactly do you want to discuss with him?'

Mo sat on the steps in front of the memorial and made Meggie sit down beside him. 'Do you see those names?' he asked, pointing up at the chiselled letters listing people no longer alive. 'There's a family behind every name – a mother or father, brothers and sisters, perhaps a wife. If one of them were to find out that letters can be brought to life, that someone who's only a name now could become flesh and blood again,

don't you think he or she would do anything, anything at all, to make it happen?'

Meggie looked at the long list. Someone had painted a heart next to the name at the top, and there was a bunch of dried flowers on the stone steps in front of the memorial.

'No one can bring back the dead, Meggie,' Mo went on. 'Perhaps it's true that death is only the beginning of a new story, but no one has ever read the book in which it's written, and the writer of *that* book certainly doesn't live in a little village on the coast playing football with his grandchildren. Your mother's name isn't on a stone like this but hidden somewhere in a book, and I have an idea which just might make it possible to alter what happened nine years ago.'

'You're going back!'

'No, I'm not. I gave you my word. Have I ever broken it?'

Meggie shook her head. You broke your word to Dustfinger, she thought, but she didn't say so out loud.

'There you are, then,' said Mo. 'I want to talk to Fenoglio. That's the only reason why I want to stay.'

Meggie looked at the sea. The sun had broken through the clouds, and all of a sudden the water was glistening and shining as if someone had poured paint into it.

'It's not far from here,' she murmured.

'What isn't?'

'Capricorn's village.'

Mo looked eastward. 'Yes, it's odd that he felt drawn here of all places, don't you think? As if he were looking for somewhere resembling the countryside of his own story.'

'Suppose he finds us?'

'Nonsense. Do you know how many villages there are along this coast?'

Meggie shrugged her shoulders. 'He found you before, even when you were far, far away.'

'He found me with Dustfinger's help, and you can be sure Dustfinger isn't going to help him again.' Mo rose and drew Meggie to her feet. 'Come on, let's go and ask Fenoglio where we can stay the night. He looks as if he could do with some company.'

Fenoglio did not tell them whether Dustfinger looked as he had imagined him. He said very little as they walked back to his house. But when Mo told him that he and Meggie would like to stay there another day his face brightened slightly. He even offered them a place to spend the night: an apartment he sometimes rented out to tourists. Mo gratefully accepted.

He and the old man talked far into the evening, while Fenoglio's grandchildren chased Meggie all over the nooks and crannies of the house. The two men sat in Fenoglio's study. It was next to the kitchen, and Meggie kept trying to listen at the closed door, but Pippo and Rico always caught her in the act and dragged her away to the next flight of stairs before she had heard more than a few words. Finally, she gave up. She let Paula show her the kittens scampering about with their mother in the tiny garden behind the house, and followed the three children to the house where they lived with their parents. They didn't stay long, just long enough to persuade their mother to let them stay at their grandfather's for supper.

Supper was pasta with sage. Pippo and Rico picked the bitter-tasting green bits out of their sauce with disgusted expressions on their faces, but Meggie and Paula enjoyed the flavour of the leaves. After the meal Mo and Fenoglio drank a whole bottle of red wine between them, and when the old man finally saw Mo and Meggie to the door he said goodnight and added, 'So you'll look at my books as we agreed, Mortimer, and I'll get down to work first thing tomorrow.'

‘What kind of work, Mo?’ asked Meggie as they walked along the dimly lit alleys together. Night had hardly cooled the air at all; a strangely foreign wind blew through the village, hot and sandy, as if it were carrying the desert itself across the sea.

‘I’d rather you didn’t ask me that,’ said Mo. ‘Let’s just act as if we were on holiday for a few days. This looks a good place for a holiday, don’t you think?’

Meggie answered only with a nod. Mo really knew her very well – he could often tell what she was thinking before she put it into words – but he sometimes forgot she wasn’t five years old any more, and these days it took rather more than a few kind words to distract her from her worries. Very well, she thought as she silently followed Mo through the sleeping village, if he doesn’t want to tell me what Fenoglio’s supposed to do for him I’ll ask old turtle-face himself. And if *he* won’t say either, then one of his grandchildren can find out for me! Paula was just the right size for a spy. It didn’t seem all that long ago since Meggie herself had been able to hide unnoticed under a table.

28

Going Home

My library was dukedom large enough.

William Shakespeare,
The Tempest

It was almost midnight by the time Elinor finally saw her garden gate beside the road. The lights down by the banks of the lake stood side by side like a caravan of glow-worms, trembling as they were reflected in the black water. It was good to be home again. Even the wind that blew on Elinor's face as she got out to open the gate felt familiar. It was all familiar, the scent of the hedges and the earth and the air, so much cooler and moister than in the south. It didn't taste of salt any more either. I might even miss that saltiness, thought Elinor. The sea always filled her with longing, though for what she was never sure.

The iron gate creaked quietly as she pushed it open, almost as if it were welcoming her home. But no other voice would greet her. 'What a silly notion, Elinor!' she muttered crossly as she got back into the car. 'Your books will welcome you home. That's good enough, surely.'

She had been in a strange mood even during the drive. She had taken her time on the way home, avoiding major roads, and had spent the night in a tiny place in the mountains, the name of which she had already forgotten. She had enjoyed being alone again, for that, after all, was what she was used to,

yet the silence in her car had suddenly begun to trouble her, and she had gone into a café in a sleepy little town which didn't even have a bookshop, just to hear other human voices. She hadn't spent much time there, staying only long enough to gulp down a cup of coffee, because she was annoyed with herself. 'What's all this in aid of, Elinor?' she had muttered when she was back in the car. 'Since when did you long for human company? High time you were home again, before you go right round the bend.'

Her house looked so dark and deserted as she drove up to it that it seemed curiously strange to her. Only the scents of her garden made her feel a little better as she went up the steps to the front door. The light over the door which usually came on automatically at night wasn't working, and it took Elinor a ridiculous amount of time to get her key into the lock. As she pushed the door open and stumbled into the pitch dark hall she quietly cursed the man who usually kept an eye on the house and garden whenever she went away. She had tried phoning him three times before she set out, but she supposed he'd gone to see his daughter again. Didn't anyone realise what treasures this house contained? Of course, if they'd been made of gold ... but they consisted only of paper and printer's ink.

It was very quiet, and for a moment Elinor thought she heard Mortimer's voice as it brought life into the church with the red walls. She could have listened to him for a hundred years. No, two hundred. At least. 'I must get him to read aloud to me when he arrives,' she murmured, taking the shoes off her tired feet. 'There must be some books he can read safely.'

Why had she never before noticed how quiet her house could be? It was silent as the grave, and the pleasure Elinor had expected to feel as soon as she was back within her own four walls was slow in coming.

'Hello, here I am again!' she cried into the silence, as she felt along the wall for the light switch. 'Now you shall all be dusted and tidied again, my dears!'

The ceiling light came on, very bright, and as Elinor stumbled back in alarm she fell over her own handbag, which she had put down on the floor. 'Oh heavens!' she whispered, getting to her feet again. 'Oh, dear heavens! Oh no!'

The custom-made bookshelves were empty. The books that had stood on them so safely, spine beside spine, now lay in untidy heaps on the floor, crumpled, dirty, and trampled underfoot, as if heavy boots had been performing a wild dance on them. Elinor began to tremble all over. She stumbled through her desecrated treasures as if she were wading through a muddy pond, pushed them aside, picked one up and let it drop, staggered on down the long corridor that led to her library.

The corridor was no better. Great disorderly piles of books were heaped so high that Elinor could hardly make her way through the ruins. At last she reached the library door. It had not been locked. Elinor stood there for an eternity, weak at the knees, before she finally dared to open it.

Her library was empty.

Not a book in sight, not a single book, not on the shelves or beneath the broken glass of the display cases. There wasn't a book on the floor either. They were all gone. Instead, a red rooster dangled from the ceiling, stone dead.

Elinor's hand flew to her mouth. The rooster's head was hanging down, its red comb flopped over its staring eyes. Its plumage was still glossy, as if all the life in it had fled there, into the fine russet breast feathers, the darkly patterned wings and the long deep-green tail feathers that shimmered like silk.

One of the windows was open. A black arrow had been drawn in soot on the white paint of the windowsill, and pointed the way to the garden outside. Elinor staggered towards the window, numb with fear. The night was not dark enough to hide what lay on the lawn outside: a shapeless mound of ashes,

pale grey in the moonlight, grey as moth wings, grey as burnt paper.

There they were. Her most valuable books. Or all that was left of them.

Elinor knelt down on the floorboards, on the wood she had so carefully chosen. The wind wafted in through the open window and over her, the familiar wind, and it smelled almost like the air in Capricorn's church. Elinor wanted to scream, she wanted to curse, rage, cry out in fury, but not a sound came out of her mouth. All she could do was weep.



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29

Only an Idea

‘Don’t have a mother,’ he said. Not only had he no mother, but he had not the slightest desire to have one. He thought them very over-rated persons.

**J.M. Barrie,
*Peter Pan***

The apartment that Fenoglio rented to tourists was only two streets away from his own house. It had two rooms plus a tiny bathroom and kitchen. Since it was on the ground floor it was rather dark, and the beds creaked when you lay down in them. All the same, Meggie slept well or, anyway, better than on Capricorn’s damp straw or in the hovel with the ruined roof.

Mo slept only fitfully. Meggie was woken twice on that first night by tom cats fighting out in the street, and both times she saw him lying there with his eyes open, arms folded behind his head, looking at the dark window.

He got up very early in the morning and went to buy food for breakfast in the little shop at the end of the street. The bread rolls were fresh and warm, and Meggie really did almost feel as if they were on holiday when Mo and she drove to the nearest town of any size to buy the basic tools of his trade: brushes, knives, fabric, stout cardboard – and truly gigantic ice-creams which they ate together in a café by the sea. Meggie still had the taste of the ice-cream in her mouth as they knocked on the door of Fenoglio’s house. The old man and Mo drank another

coffee in his green kitchen before he took Mo and Meggie up to the attic where he kept his books.

‘I don’t believe it!’ said Mo, outraged, standing in front of Fenoglio’s dusty bookshelves. ‘They ought all to be removed from you on the spot! When did you last come up here? I could scrape the dust off their pages with a trowel.’

‘I had to put them up here, said Fenoglio defensively, signs of a guilty conscience lurking among his wrinkles. ‘I was getting so short of space downstairs with all those shelves, and anyway my grandchildren were always pulling them about.’

‘They could hardly have done as much damage as the damp and dirt up here,’ said Mo.

Fenoglio went downstairs again looking crestfallen. ‘You poor child. Is your father always so strict?’ he asked Meggie as they climbed down the steep staircase.

‘Only about books,’ she said.

Fenoglio disappeared into his study before she could ask him any questions, and his grandchildren were at school or playgroup, so she fetched the books that Elinor had given her and sat down with them on the flight of steps leading into Fenoglio’s tiny garden. Wild roses grew so thickly there that you could hardly take a step without feeling their shoots twine round your legs, and from the top step you could see the sea, far away yet looking very close.

Meggie opened the book of poems. She had to narrow her eyes because the sun was shining in her face so brightly, and before beginning to read she looked over her shoulder to make quite sure Mo hadn’t followed her down. She didn’t want him to catch her at what she was planning to do. She was ashamed of it, but the temptation was just too great.

When she was perfectly sure no one was coming she took a deep breath, cleared her throat – and began. She shaped every word with her lips the way she had seen Mo do it, almost tenderly, as if every letter were a musical note and any words

spoken without love were a discord in the melody. But she soon realised that if she paid too much attention to every separate word the sentence didn't sound right any more, and the pictures behind it were lost if she concentrated on the sound alone and not the sense. It was difficult. So difficult. And the sun was making her drowsy, until at last she closed the book and held her face up to its warm rays. It was silly of her to try anyway. Very silly ...

Later that afternoon Pippo, Paula and Rico came back and Meggie walked round the village with them. They bought things in the shop where Mo had gone in the morning, sat on a wall on the outskirts of the village, watched ants carrying pine needles and flower seeds over the rough stones, and counted the ships sailing by on the distant sea.

A second day passed like this. Now and then Meggie wondered where Dustfinger could be, and whether Farid was still with him, how Elinor was, and if she was beginning to wonder where they were.

There was no answer to any of these questions, and Meggie didn't find out what Fenoglio was doing behind his study door either. 'Chewing his pencil,' Paula told her when she had managed to hide under her grandfather's desk. 'Just chewing the end of his pencil and walking up and down.'

'Mo, when are we going to Elinor's house?' Meggie asked on their second night, when she sensed that, yet again, he couldn't sleep. She perched on the edge of his bed. The bed creaked just like hers.

'Soon,' he said. 'Go to sleep again now, OK?'

'Do you miss her – my mother, I mean?' Meggie herself didn't know why she asked that question out of the blue. All of a sudden it was there, on the tip of her tongue, and had to be spoken aloud.

It was a long time before Mo answered.

‘Sometimes,’ he said at last. ‘In the morning, at midday, in the evening, at night. Almost all the time.’

Meggie felt jealousy digging its little claws into her heart. She knew that feeling; she felt it every time Mo had a new girlfriend. But how could she be jealous of her own mother? ‘Tell me about her,’ she said quietly. ‘I don’t mean the made-up stories you used to tell.’

She used to search her books for a suitable mother, but there were hardly any mothers in her favourite stories. Tom Sawyer? No mother. Huck Finn? Ditto. Peter Pan and the Lost Boys? Not a mother in sight. Jim Button was motherless too – and all you found in fairy tales were wicked stepmothers, heartless, jealous stepmothers ... the list could go on for ever. That had often comforted Meggie in the past. It didn’t seem particularly unusual not to have a mother, or at least not in the books she liked best.

‘What do you want me to tell you?’ Mo looked at the window. The tom cats were fighting outside again. Their yowls sounded like babies crying. ‘You look more like her than me, I’m glad to say. She laughs like you, and she chews a strand of hair while she’s reading exactly the way you do. She’s shortsighted, but too vain to wear glasses—’

‘I can understand that.’ Meggie sat down beside him. His arm hardly hurt him now. The bite from Basta’s dog had almost healed up, but there would always be a scar, pale as the scar Basta’s knife had left nine years ago.

‘What do you mean? I like glasses,’ said Mo.

‘I don’t. Go on.’

‘She loves stones, flat, smooth stones that fit comfortably into the hand. She always has one or two of them in her pocket, and she weights down books with them, specially paperbacks. She doesn’t like the covers to stick up in the air, but you were always taking the stones away and rolling them over the wooden floor.’

‘And then she was cross.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. She tickled your fat little neck until you let go of the stones.’ Mo turned round to look at her. ‘Do you really *not* miss her, Meggie?’

‘I don’t know. Well, only if I’m feeling angry with you.’

‘About a dozen times a day, then?’

‘Don’t be so silly!’ Meggie dug her elbow into his ribs.

They both listened for any sounds in the night. The window was open just a crack, and it was quiet outside. The tom cats had fallen silent, probably licking their wounds. For a moment Meggie thought she could hear the sea breaking in the distance, but perhaps it was only the traffic on the nearby motorway.

‘Where do you think Dustfinger has gone?’ The darkness enveloped them like a soft cloth. ‘I’ll miss this warmth, she thought, I really will.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mo. His voice sounded absent. ‘A long way off, I hope, but I’m not sure.’

Nor was Meggie. ‘Do you think that boy’s still with him?’ Farid. She liked his name.

‘I expect so. He was running after Dustfinger like a dog.’

‘He likes Dustfinger. Do you think Dustfinger likes him?’

Mo shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t know who or what Dustfinger likes.’

Meggie rested her head against his chest, the way she always used to at home when he was telling her a story. ‘He still wants the book, doesn’t he?’ she whispered. ‘Basta will make mincemeat of him if he catches him. He must have got a new knife by now.’

Someone was coming along the narrow alley. A door opened and was closed again, a dog barked.

‘If it wasn’t for you,’ said Mo, ‘I’d go back too.’



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Talkative Pippo

‘We were told there was a village nearby that might enjoy our skills.’

‘You were misinformed,’ Buttercup told him. ‘There is no one, not for many miles.’

‘Then there will be no one to hear you scream,’ the Sicilian said, and he jumped with frightening agility toward her face.

William Goldman,
The Princess Bride

Next morning, at around ten o’clock, Elinor rang Fenoglio’s house. Meggie was sitting upstairs with Mo, watching him remove a book from its mildewed binding as carefully as if he were releasing an injured animal from a trap.

‘Mortimer!’ Fenoglio called up the stairs. ‘Come down at once, will you? There’s some hysterical female on the phone, shouting in my ear. I can’t make head nor tail of it. Says she’s a friend of yours.’

Mo put the book to one side, minus its cover, and went downstairs. Fenoglio handed him the receiver with a gloomy expression on his face. Elinor’s voice was pouring rage and despair into the peaceful study. Mo himself had some difficulty in making sense of what she was saying.

‘But how did he know ... oh, of course ...’ Meggie heard him saying. ‘Burnt? All of them?’ He passed a hand over his face and glanced in Meggie’s direction, but she had a feeling that he was looking straight through her. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘Yes, of course, though I’m afraid they won’t believe a word of it. And the police down here aren’t responsible for what’s happened to your books ... yes, of course. Naturally ... I’ll pick you up. Yes.’

Then he rang off.

Fenoglio could not conceal his curiosity. He scented a new story in the offing. ‘What was all that about?’ he asked impatiently as Mo just stood there staring at the telephone. Rico was clinging to Fenoglio’s back like a little monkey. It was Saturday, but the other two children hadn’t turned up yet. ‘What’s the matter, Mortimer? Aren’t you talking to us any more? Look at your father, Meggie! Standing there like a stuffed dummy!’

‘That was Elinor,’ said Mo. ‘Meggie’s mother’s aunt. I told you about her. Capricorn’s men broke into her house. They swept the books off the shelves all over the house and trampled on them, and the books in Elinor’s library ...’ He hesitated for a moment before going on. ‘Her most valuable books – they took them out into the garden and burned them. All she found in her library was a dead rooster.’

Fenoglio let his grandson slide off his back. ‘Rico, go and look for the kittens,’ he said. ‘This is not for your ears.’ Rico protested, but his grandfather pushed him out of the room and closed the door after him. ‘What makes you so sure Capricorn is behind this?’ he asked, turning back to Mo.

‘Who else would do such a thing? Anyway, as far as I remember the red rooster is his emblem. Forgotten your own story, have you?’

Fenoglio was looking downcast. ‘No, no, I remember that,’ he murmured.

‘What about Elinor?’ Meggie’s heart beat anxiously as she waited for Mo’s answer.

‘Luckily, she wasn’t back yet when it happened. She took her time going home. Thank heavens. But you can imagine how she feels. Her finest books – my God!’

Fenoglio was picking up some toy soldiers from his rug with trembling fingers. ‘Yes, Capricorn likes fire,’ he said huskily. ‘If it was really his doing, your friend can think herself fortunate he didn’t burn her too.’

‘I’ll tell her.’ Mo picked up a matchbox lying on Fenoglio’s writing-desk, opened it and slowly closed it again.

‘What about my books?’ Meggie hardly dared to ask. ‘My book-box – I hid it under the bed.’

Mo put the matchbox back on the desk. ‘That’s the one piece of good news,’ he said. ‘No one touched your book-box. It’s still under the bed. Elinor looked.’

Meggie took a deep breath. Was it Basta who had set fire to the books? No, Basta was afraid of fire; she remembered only too well how Dustfinger had mocked him for it. But in the last resort it made no difference which of the Black Jackets it had been. Elinor’s treasures were gone, and not even Mo could bring them back.

‘Elinor is flying back down here. I’m to pick her up at the airport,’ said Mo. ‘She’s taken it into her head to set the police on Capricorn. I told her I didn’t think she’d have much luck. Even if she had evidence that it was his men who broke into her house, how can she prove he gave the order? But you know Elinor.’

Meggie nodded gloomily. Oh yes, she knew Elinor – and she understood her rage only too well.

But Fenoglio laughed. ‘The police! You don’t get anywhere by setting the police on Capricorn!’ he said. ‘He makes his own rules, his own laws—’

‘Oh, be quiet! This isn’t a book you’re writing!’ Mo interrupted him. ‘Very likely it’s amusing to invent a character like Capricorn, but believe you me, it’s not in the least bit funny to cross his path. I’m off to the airport. I’ll leave Meggie here. Look after her.’

And he was out of the door before Meggie could protest. She ran after him, but Paula and Pippo met her coming down the street. They caught hold of her, trying to make her play with them. They wanted her to be a cannibal, a witch, a six-armed monster – the characters from their grandfather’s stories with which they populated their games. By the time Meggie had finally managed to shake off their little hands, Mo had long since gone. The place where he had parked the hire-car was empty, and Meggie stood in the square, alone with the war memorial and a few old men gazing out to sea with their hands in their trouser pockets.

Restlessly, she wandered over to the steps in front of the memorial and sat down. She didn’t feel like chasing Fenoglio’s grandchildren round his house or playing hide-and-seek with them. She just wanted to sit there and wait for Mo’s return. The hot wind that had blown through the village overnight had left fine sand on all the windowsills. The air was cooler than it had been for the last few days. The sky above the sea was still clear, but grey clouds were forming above the hills, and every time the sun disappeared behind them a shadow fell over the village rooftops, making Meggie shiver.

A cat stalked towards her, stiff-legged, tail erect. It was a skinny little creature with ticks in its grey fur, and ribs showing through its thin coat like stripes. Meggie enticed it over, speaking to it gently, until it put its head under her arm and purred, asking to be petted. It didn’t look as if it belonged to anyone: no collar, not an ounce of fat on it, nothing to suggest it had a caring owner. Meggie scratched its ears and chin and stroked its back as she looked down the road that went round a

sharp bend as it left the village and disappeared from sight beyond the houses.

How far was it to the nearest airport? Meggie propped her chin on her hands. The clouds above her were massing more and more ominously. They loomed overhead, close-packed and grey with rain.

The cat rubbed against her knee, and as Meggie's fingers stroked its dirty fur an awful thought suddenly occurred to her. Suppose Elinor's house wasn't all Dustfinger had told Capricorn about? Suppose he'd told him where she and Mo had been living too? Would they find a heap of ashes waiting for them at the farmhouse? No, she wouldn't think about that. He doesn't know, she whispered. He has no idea! Dustfinger didn't tell him. She kept whispering it like a magic charm.

After a while she felt a raindrop on her hand, then another. She looked up at the sky. There wasn't so much as a speck of blue to be seen. How quickly the nearby sea could make the weather change! All right, I'll just wait in the apartment, she thought. We might even have some milk there for the cat. The poor thing weighed no more than a small damp towel. Meggie was afraid of breaking something when she picked it up.

It was pitch dark in the apartment. Mo had closed the shutters that morning so that the sun wouldn't make it too hot. Meggie was shivering and wet from the fine drizzle when she entered the cool bedroom. She put the cat down on her unmade bed, slipped on Mo's sweater, which was much too big for her, and went into the kitchen. The milk carton was almost empty, but if she diluted what was left with a little warm water there was just enough for a saucerful.

The cat jumped down so quickly when Meggie put the milk on the floor beside the bed that it almost fell over its own paws. Rain was falling harder and harder outside. Meggie listened to it drumming on the paving stones. She went over to the window and opened the shutters. The narrow strip of sky

visible between the rooftops was as dark as if the sun were about to set. Meggie went over to Mo's bed and sat down on it. The cat was still licking the saucer, its little tongue greedily rasping over the flower-patterned china, hoping for a last delicious drop. Meggie heard footsteps out in the street, and then a knock at the door. Who was that? Mo couldn't possibly be back yet. Or had he forgotten something? The cat had disappeared, probably to hide under the bed. 'Who's there?' called Meggie.

'Meggie!' a child's voice called back. Of course, Paula or Pippo. Yes, it must be Pippo. They probably wanted to go looking for ants with her again, even though it was raining. A grey paw emerged from under the bed and patted her shoelace. Meggie went out into the tiny hall. 'I don't have time to play just now!' she called through the closed door.

'Please, Meggie!' begged Pippo's voice.

Sighing, Meggie opened the door – and found herself looking straight into Basta's face.

'Well, well, who do we have here?' he asked in a menacingly soft voice, his fingers around Pippo's thin little neck. 'What do you say to that, Flatnose? She doesn't have time to play.' Basta pushed Meggie roughly aside and came through the door with Pippo, followed, of course, by Flatnose, whose broad shoulders would hardly fit through the doorway.

'Let go of him!' Meggie snapped at Basta, although her voice shook. 'You're hurting him.'

'Am I indeed?' Basta looked down at Pippo's pale face. 'Not very nice of me, is it, especially since he showed us where you were hiding?' With these last words he squeezed Pippo's neck even more firmly.

'Do you know how long we lay in that filthy hovel?' he snarled at Meggie.

She took a step backwards.

‘A *very long* time!’ Basta emphasised the word, putting his foxy face so close to Meggie’s she could see herself reflected in his eyes. ‘Isn’t that right, Flatnose?’

‘Those damn rats almost nibbled my toes off,’ growled the giant. ‘Wouldn’t I just love to twist this little witch’s nose until it’s pointing the wrong way round!’

‘Later, maybe.’ Basta pushed Meggie into the dark bedroom. ‘Where’s your father?’ he asked. ‘This little lad,’ he said, letting go of Pippo’s throat and prodding him in the back so roughly that he stumbled against Meggie, ‘told us he’s gone out. Gone out where?’

‘Shopping.’ Meggie could hardly breathe, she was so frightened. ‘How did you find us?’ she whispered, but instantly knew the answer. Dustfinger. Of course. Who else? But why had he betrayed them this time?

‘Dustfinger,’ replied Basta, as if he had read her thoughts. ‘It’s just too easy to find that fellow. There aren’t so many crazy jugglers in this world who go around breathing fire and who have a tame marten, not to mention one with horns. So we only had to ask around a bit, and once we were on Dustfinger’s trail we were also on your father’s, of course. We arrived just in time to see you drive away from the hotel car park, and we’d certainly have paid you a visit before now if this fool,’ he said, digging his elbow so hard into Flatnose’s stomach he let out a grunt of pain, ‘hadn’t lost sight of you on our way here. We searched almost a dozen villages, wore our voices out asking questions, ran ourselves off our feet, until we finally got here, and one of those old fellows who spend all day staring out to sea remembered Dustfinger’s scarred face. Where is he? Is he – er – out shopping too?’ asked Basta, with a scornful twist of his mouth.

Meggie shook her head. ‘He went away,’ she replied tonelessly. ‘Ages ago.’ So Dustfinger hadn’t given them away

after all. Not this time. *And* he'd slipped through Basta's fingers. Meggie could almost have smiled.

'You burned Elinor's books!' she said, holding Pippo close. He was still speechless with terror. 'You'll be sorry you did that.'

'Oh, will we?' Basta smiled unpleasantly. 'I wonder why? As far as I know Cockerell had a lot of fun with those books. But that's enough talk. We don't have for ever. That boy,' he said, pointing at Pippo, who retreated as if Basta's forefinger were a knife, 'has told us some strange stories about a grandfather who writes books, and a book in which your father took a particular interest.'

Meggie swallowed. Stupid Pippo. Stupid, talkative little Pippo.

'Lost your tongue?' asked Basta. 'Shall I squeeze the boy's skinny neck again?'

Pippo began crying and buried his face in Mo's sweater. Meggie stroked his curly head comfortingly.

'His grandfather doesn't have the book you're thinking of any more,' she told Basta. 'You and your friends stole it long ago!' Her voice sounded hoarse with hatred, and her own thoughts sickened her. She wanted to kick Basta, hit him, stab him in the stomach with his own knife, the brand-new knife he wore stuck in his belt.

'Stole it. Just fancy!' Basta grinned at Flatnose. 'I think we'd better make sure of that for ourselves, don't you?'

Flatnose nodded distractedly, looking around him. 'Hey, hear that?'

There was a scratching sound under the bed. Flatnose knelt down, pushed the hanging edge of the sheet aside, and poked around under the bed with the barrel of his gun. Spitting, the grey cat shot out of hiding, and when Flatnose tried to grab it the cat raked his ugly face with its claws. He leaped to his feet

with a yelp of pain. 'I'll wring its neck!' he bellowed. 'I'll break that cat's neck!'

Meggie was about to stand in his way as he lunged for the cat, but Basta got in first. 'You'll do no such thing!' he spat at Flatnose, as the grey cat disappeared under the wardrobe. 'Killing cats is unlucky. How often do I have to tell you?'

'Nonsense! Superstitious garbage! I've wrung several of the brutes' necks already!' said Flatnose angrily, pressing one hand to his bleeding cheek. 'And has my luck been worse than yours? You could send a man crazy, the way you carry on: don't walk in that shadow, it's unlucky; oh, watch out, you put your left boot on first, that's unlucky; oh my, someone yawned – mercy me, that means I'll fall down dead tomorrow!'

'Shut up!' snapped Basta. 'If anyone around here is talking nonsense it's you. Get those children to the door!'

Pippo clung to Meggie as Flatnose forced them out into the corridor. 'Why are you bawling like that?' he growled at the little boy. 'We're off to see your grandfather now.'

Pippo never let go of Meggie's hand once as they stumbled after Flatnose. He was clutching it so hard that his stubby fingernails dug into her skin. Oh, she thought, why didn't Mo listen to me? We could have gone home. It was still raining heavily. Raindrops ran over Meggie's face and down her neck. The streets were empty; there was no one around to help them. Basta was walking just behind her, and she heard him quietly cursing the rain. When they reached Fenoglio's house Meggie's feet were wet through, and Pippo's curls were plastered to his head. Perhaps he won't be at home, Meggie hoped. She was just thinking about what Basta would do then, when the red door opened and Fenoglio stood facing them.

'What on earth do you children think you're doing, running around in weather like this?' he said angrily. 'I was just going out to look for you. Come on in, and hurry up.'

'May we come in too?'

Basta and Flatnose had been standing either side of the door with their backs to the wall, so that Fenoglio wouldn't see them immediately, but now Basta moved up behind Meggie and put his hands on her shoulders. Fenoglio stared at him in surprise as Flatnose stepped forward and planted a foot in the open doorway. Pippo scurried past him, nimble as a weasel, and disappeared into the house.

'Who are these people?' Fenoglio looked at Meggie as crossly as if she had brought the two strangers there of her own free will. 'Friends of your father's?'

Meggie mopped the rain off her face and looked back at him with equal reproach. 'You ought to know them better than I do!' she said. Basta's fingers were digging into her shoulders.

'Know them?' Fenoglio looked at her blankly. Then he studied Basta. His face froze. 'Great heavens above!' he murmured. 'I don't believe it!'

Paula peered out from behind his back. 'Pippo's crying!' she announced. 'He's hidden in the cupboard.'

'Well, you go back to him,' said Fenoglio, never taking his eyes off Basta. 'I'll be with you in a minute.'

'How much longer are we going to stand out here, Basta?' growled Flatnose. 'Until we shrink in this rain?'

'Basta!' repeated Fenoglio without stepping aside.

'Yes, that's my name, old man.' Basta's eyes always narrowed when he smiled. 'We're here because you have something that interests us a great deal – a book.'

Of course. Meggie almost burst out laughing. He didn't know! Basta didn't know who Fenoglio was. How could he? How could he know that this old man had invented him, made him up out of paper and ink, made up his face, his knife, his evil nature?

'That's enough talk!' growled Flatnose. 'The rain's running into my ears.' He brushed Fenoglio aside like a troublesome fly

as he pushed past him into the house. Basta followed, with Meggie. Pippo was still sobbing inside the kitchen cupboard. Paula was standing in front of it, talking to him soothingly through the closed door. When Fenoglio came into the kitchen with the strangers she spun round and looked at Flatnose's face nervously. It was as dark and dismal as ever.

Sitting down at the table, Fenoglio beckoned Paula over without a word.

'Well, where is it?' Basta was looking round, scanning the room, but Fenoglio was too deeply absorbed in the sight of his two creations to reply. He couldn't take his eyes off Basta in particular, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

'I told you: there's no copy of it here!' Meggie replied for him.

Basta acted as if he hadn't heard her, and gestured impatiently to Flatnose. 'Look for it!' he ordered. Grumbling, Flatnose obeyed. Meggie heard him trampling up the narrow wooden staircase that led to the attic.

'Right, little witch, how did you and your father find the old man?' Basta prodded her in the back. 'How did you know he still has a copy?'

Meggie cast Fenoglio a warning glance, but unfortunately he was as ready to talk as Pippo, who had so willingly told Basta all about her and his grandfather.

'How did they find me? I wrote the book!' announced the old man proudly. Perhaps he expected that Basta would instantly fall on his knees before him, but Basta only gave a pitying smile.

'Oh yes, of course you did!' he said, taking the knife from his belt.

'He really did write it!' Meggie couldn't resist saying so. She wanted to see the fear that had turned Dustfinger pale when he heard about Fenoglio appear on Basta's face too, but Basta just

smiled again and began carving notches in Fenoglio's kitchen table.

'Who thought up *that* story?' he asked. 'Your father? You think I look stupid? Everyone knows that stories in books are as old as the hills and were written by people dead and buried long ago.' He jabbed the blade of the knife into the wood, pulled it out and jabbed it in again. Flatnose was trampling about overhead.

'Dead and buried. How interesting.' Fenoglio sat Paula on his lap. 'Did you hear that, Paula? This young man believes all books were written in the distant past by dead people who picked up the stories from heaven knows where. Plucked straight from the air, maybe?' Paula couldn't help giggling. It had gone very quiet in the cupboard. Pippo was probably listening at the door, holding his breath.

'What's so funny about that?' Basta reared up like a snake when someone has trodden on its tail. Fenoglio ignored him. Smiling, he looked down at his hands – as if remembering the day when they had begun to write Basta's story. Then he looked straight at him.

'You always wear long sleeves, don't you?' he said. 'Shall I tell you why?'

Basta narrowed his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. 'Damn it all, why is it taking that idiot so long to find a book?'

Fenoglio looked at him, his arms folded. 'Easy: he can't read!' he said quietly. 'You can't read either – unless you've learnt by now? None of Capricorn's men can read, any more than Capricorn himself can.'

Basta drove the knife so far into the surface of the table that he had difficulty pulling it out again. 'Of course he can read. What are you going on about?' He leaned threateningly over the table. 'I don't like the way you talk, old man. Why don't I carve a few more wrinkles in your face?'

Fenoglio smiled. Perhaps he thought Basta couldn't hurt him because he, Fenoglio, had made him up. Meggie wasn't so sure of that. 'You wear long sleeves,' Fenoglio continued very slowly, as if giving Basta time to take in every single word, 'because your master likes playing with fire. You burned both arms right up to the shoulders when you obeyed his orders and set fire to the house of a man who had dared to refuse his daughter to Capricorn. Ever since then, someone else has laid the fire, and you confine yourself to playing games with knives.'

Basta jumped up so suddenly that Paula slid off Fenoglio's lap and hid under the table. 'Like to make yourself out clever, do you?' he growled, holding his knife under Fenoglio's chin. 'When all you've done is read the wretched book. Well?'

Fenoglio looked him in the eye. The knife under his chin didn't seem to scare him half as much as it did Meggie. 'Oh, I know all about you, Basta,' he said. 'I know you'd give your life for Capricorn any day, and you're always hungry for his praise. I know you were younger than Meggie when his men picked you up, and ever since you've loved him like a father. But shall I tell you something? Capricorn thinks you're stupid, and despises you for it. He despises you all, his devoted black-clad sons, although it's his own doing that you're still so ignorant. And he wouldn't hesitate to set the police on to any one of you if it was to his advantage. Are you quite clear about that?'

'Hold your filthy tongue, old man!' Basta's knife came alarmingly close to Fenoglio's face and, for a moment, Meggie thought he would slit his nose. 'You don't know anything about Capricorn. Only what you read in the stupid book. I think I ought to cut your throat – now!'

'Wait!'

Basta whirled round to look at Meggie. 'And you keep out of this! I'll deal with you later, you little toad,' he said.

Fenoglio's hands were pressed to his own throat. He was staring blankly at Basta, having at last realised he was by no

means safe from the man's knife.

'But you can't kill him. Really you can't!' cried Meggie. 'If you do—'

Basta's thumb stroked the blade of his knife. 'If I do, then what?'

Desperately, Meggie searched for the right words ... what should she say? Oh, what? 'Because ... because Capricorn would die too,' she managed. 'Yes. That's it. You'd all die, you and Flatnose and Capricorn. If you kill this old man you'll *all* die, because he made you up.'

Basta's lips twisted in a scornful smile, but he lowered his knife and, for a moment, Meggie even thought she saw a hint of fear in his eyes.

Fenoglio cast her a relieved glance.

Basta stepped back, examined the blade of his knife closely as if he had discovered a mark on it, and then rubbed it clean on the hem of his black jacket. 'I don't believe a word of it!' he said. 'But this is such a weird story, I think Capricorn might like to hear it too. So,' he added, giving the shiny blade a last polish before snapping the knife shut and putting it back in his belt, 'we won't take only the book and the girl, we'll take you too, old man.'

Meggie heard Fenoglio draw in a sharp breath. She herself was so scared she wasn't sure if her heart was beating at all. Take them away. Basta was going to take them away. No, she thought, oh please, no!

'Take us away where?' asked Fenoglio.

'Ask the girl here!' Basta pointed mockingly at Meggie. 'She and her father have had the honour of being our guests already. Bed and board thrown in.'

'But this is nonsense!' cried Fenoglio. 'I thought it was the book you wanted.'

‘Then you thought wrong. We didn’t even know there was supposed to be another copy. No, we were just sent to bring Silvertongue back. Capricorn doesn’t like his guests to leave without saying goodbye, and Silvertongue’s a very special guest, isn’t that right, sweetheart?’ Basta winked at Meggie. ‘But he isn’t here, and I have better things to do than hang around waiting for him. So I’ll take his daughter – and he’ll come chasing after her of his own accord.’ Basta went up to Meggie and pushed her hair back behind her ears. ‘She makes pretty bait, wouldn’t you say?’ he asked. ‘Oh yes, old man, take it from me: if we have this little creature we’ll have her father too. He’ll come like a dancing bear led by a ring in his nose.’

Meggie struck his hand aside, trembling with fury.

‘Don’t you do that again!’ Basta whispered in her ear.

Meggie was glad that Flatnose came trudging downstairs at this moment. He appeared in the kitchen doorway, breathless and with several books under his arm. ‘Here!’ he said, dumping them on the table. ‘They all begin with this single upright stroke followed by the three up-and-down lines. Just the way you drew it.’ He put a stained piece of paper down beside the books. The letters I and N were clumsily traced on it, and looked as if the hand that set them down had found the task very difficult.

Basta spread the books out on the table and pushed them apart from each other with his knife. ‘These are no good,’ he said, pushing two off the table so that they landed on the floor, with crumpled pages. ‘Nor are these.’ Two more landed on the floor, and finally Basta swept the rest off the table too. ‘Are you quite sure there isn’t another one beginning like that?’ he asked Flatnose angrily.

‘Yes, I’m sure!’

‘You’d better not be wrong. Because I do assure you, you’ll be the one to pay for it, not me!’

Flatnose cast a worried look over the books at his feet.

‘Oh, and another little change of plan: we’re taking *him* with us as well.’ Basta pointed his knife at Fenoglio. ‘So he can tell the boss his amazing stories. Very entertaining they are too, believe you me. And just in case he’s hidden a book somewhere – well, we’ll have plenty of time to ask him about that once we get back. You keep your eye on the old man and I’ll watch the girl.’

Flatnose nodded, and hauled Fenoglio up from his chair. But Basta reached for Meggie’s arm. Back to Capricorn – she had to bite her lip to stop herself bursting into tears as Basta dragged her to Fenoglio’s kitchen door. No. Basta wouldn’t see her weep, she wasn’t going to give him that satisfaction. At least they haven’t got Mo, she thought. And suddenly there was only one thought in her head: suppose he crossed their path before they left the village? Suppose he came to meet them, on his way back with Elinor?

All at once she couldn’t wait to get away, but Flatnose had paused in the doorway. ‘What about the little girl and that cry-baby in the cupboard?’ he asked.

Pippo’s sobs died away, and Fenoglio’s face turned even whiter than Basta’s shirt.

‘Right, old man, what do you think I’m going to do with them?’ asked Basta scornfully. ‘You say you know all about me.’

Fenoglio couldn’t utter a word. Every cruel deed with which he had ever credited Basta was probably going through his head. Basta relished the fear on his face for a few delicious minutes, then he turned to Flatnose. ‘The other children stay behind,’ he said. ‘Our little madam here will do.’

With difficulty, Fenoglio recovered his powers of speech. ‘Paula, go home!’ he said as Flatnose forced him down the hall. ‘Do you hear? Go home at once. Tell your mother I’ve gone away for a few days, all right?’

‘We’ll just look in at that apartment again,’ Basta said as they were standing in the street outside. ‘I quite forgot to leave a

message for your father. I mean, he ought to know where you are, don't you think?'

What kind of message will it be, thought Meggie, when you can scarcely put two letters together? But of course she didn't say so out loud. She was terrified the whole time that Mo might come to meet them. But when they reached the front door of the apartment there was only an old lady walking down the street.

'One word out of you and I'll go back and wring both children's necks!' Basta whispered to Fenoglio as the old lady slowed down.

'Hello, Rosalia,' said Fenoglio huskily. 'Guess what – I have new tenants for my apartment. How about that, then?'

The suspicion vanished from Rosalia's face, and a moment later she had disappeared round a corner of the street. Meggie opened the door, and for the second time let Basta and Flatnose into the apartment where she and Mo had felt so safe.

In the hall she remembered the grey cat, and looked around anxiously, but it was nowhere to be seen. 'The cat has to go out,' she said when they were in the bedroom. 'Or it'll starve to death. That's unlucky.'

Basta opened the window. 'Right, it can get out now,' he said.

Flatnose snorted scornfully, but this time he made no comment on Basta's superstitious nature.

'Can I take some clothes?' asked Meggie.

Flatnose just grunted, and Fenoglio looked unhappily down at himself. 'I could do with a change of clothes too,' he said, but no one took any notice. Basta was busy with his message. Carefully, with the tip of his tongue between his teeth, he was gouging his name in the wood of the wardrobe with his knife. BASTA. Mo would understand that only too well.

Meggie hastily stuffed a few things in her rucksack. She kept Mo's sweater on. She was about to put Elinor's two books in

with the clothes but Basta knocked them out of her hand.

‘Those stay here,’ he said.

Mo did not return in time to meet them as they walked to Basta’s car. All that long, endless way, he didn’t appear.



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In the Hills

‘Let him alone,’ said Merlin. ‘Perhaps he does not want to be friends with you until he knows what you are like. With owls, it is never easy-come and easy-go.’

**T.H. White,
*The Sword in the Stone***

Dustfinger looked across to Capricorn’s village. It seemed close enough to touch. Some of the windows reflected the sky, and one of the Black Jackets was repairing a couple of broken tiles on a roof. Dustfinger saw him wipe the sweat from his brow. The fools never took their jackets off even in this heat – as if they were afraid of falling apart without that black uniform. Not that crows take off their feathers in the sun either, and these men were just a flock of crows: robbers, carrion-eaters who liked to plunge their sharp beaks into dead flesh.

The boy had been uneasy when he saw how close Dustfinger’s chosen hiding-place was to the village, but Dustfinger had explained why there couldn’t be anywhere safer to lie low among the surrounding hills. The charred walls were hardly visible, camouflaged as they were by the gorse and wild thyme that had taken root among the soot-blackened stones. Capricorn’s men had set fire to the house soon after taking over the deserted village. The old woman who had lived there had refused to leave, but Capricorn wouldn’t tolerate prying eyes so

close to his new hideout and gave his followers a free hand. His crows, his black vultures, had set fire to the home-made chicken run and the one-roomed cottage. They had trampled over the carefully tended beds in the garden, and shot the donkey that was almost as old as its mistress. They came under cover of darkness as usual, and the moon, so one of Capricorn's maidservants had told Dustfinger, shone particularly brightly that night. The old woman had tottered out of the house, weeping and screaming. Then she'd cursed them. She cursed them all, but her eyes were turned on only one of them. Basta, who was standing a little way from the others because he feared the fire, his shirt very white in the moonlight. Perhaps she had hoped that shirt might conceal something like innocence or a kind heart. On Basta's orders, Flatnose had put his hand over her mouth to shut her up. The others had laughed – until, unexpectedly, she fell down dead and lay there lifeless among her trampled garden beds. Ever since that day, Basta had feared this place more than anywhere else in the hills. No, there could be nowhere better to keep watch on Capricorn's village.

Dustfinger spent most of the time perched in one of the oaks that had once given the old woman a shady place to sit outside her cottage. Its branches hid him from the curious eyes of anyone who might stray up the hillside. He perched there motionless for hour upon hour, watching the car park and the houses through his binoculars. He had told Farid to stay further away, in the hollow behind the house. The boy had reluctantly obeyed. He was sticking close to Dustfinger, close as a burr, and he didn't like the gutted cottage. 'Her ghost is still here, for sure,' he kept saying. 'That old woman's ghost. Suppose she was a witch?' But Dustfinger just laughed at him. There were no ghosts in this world, or if there were they never showed themselves. The hollow was so well sheltered that he had even risked lighting a fire the previous night. The boy had snared a rabbit; he was good at setting traps and more ruthless than

Dustfinger. When Dustfinger caught a rabbit he didn't take it out of the trap until he was quite sure the poor thing had stopped wriggling. Farid had no such scruples. Perhaps he had gone hungry too often.

Above all he loved to watch with wonder and admiration whenever Dustfinger took a few little sticks and lit a fire. The boy had already burnt his fingers playing games with matches. The flames had bitten his nose and his lips, yet Dustfinger kept finding him making torches of cotton wool and thin twigs. Once he set light to the dry grass, and Dustfinger grabbed him and shook him like a disobedient dog until tears came into his eyes. 'Listen hard, because I'm not telling you again! Fire is a dangerous creature!' he had shouted at Farid. 'Fire is not your friend. It will kill you if you don't respect it. And its smoke will give you away to your enemies!'

'But it's *your* friend!' the boy had stammered defiantly.

'Nonsense! I'm not careless, that's all. I take note of the wind! You let it play with the fire. I've told you a hundred times: never light a fire when it's windy. Now go and look for Gwin.'

'It is your friend, though!' the boy had muttered before running off. 'Or anyway, it obeys you better than the marten does.'

He was right there, though that didn't mean much, for a marten obeys only itself, and even fire didn't obey Dustfinger in this world as well as in his own, where the flames turned to flower shapes whenever he told them to. They had forked up in the air for him, like trees branching in the night, and rained down sparks. They had roared and whispered with their crackling voices, they had danced when he said the word. The flames here were both tame and mutinous, strange, silent beasts which sometimes bit the hand that fed them. Only occasionally, on cold nights when there was nothing but the flames to stave off his loneliness, did he think he heard them calling to him, but they whispered words he didn't understand.

However, the boy was probably right. Yes, fire was his friend, but it was also the reason why Capricorn had summoned him back in that other life. 'Show me how to play with fire!' he had said when his men dragged Dustfinger before him, and Dustfinger had obeyed. He still regretted teaching him so much, for Capricorn loved to give fire free rein, catching it again only when it had eaten its fill of crops and stables, houses and anything that couldn't run fast enough.

'Is he still away?' Farid was leaning against the rough bark of the tree. The boy was as quiet as a snake. Dustfinger always jumped when he appeared so suddenly.

'Yes,' he said. 'Luck's on our side.' On the day they came to this hideout Capricorn's car had been standing in the parking place, but that afternoon two of the boys had begun polishing its silver paintwork until they could see their reflections in it, and shortly before it was dark it had driven off. Capricorn often had himself driven around the countryside, to the villages further down the coast or to one of his other bases, as he liked to call them, although these so-called bases were often little more than a hut in the woods with a couple of bored men guarding it. Like Dustfinger, he couldn't drive a car, but some of his men had mastered the art of it. Hardly any of them held a driving licence, though, because to pass the test they would have to be able to read.

'Yes, I'll go over there again tonight,' murmured Dustfinger. 'He won't be away much longer, and Basta is sure to be back soon too.' Basta's car had not been in the car park at all since they'd come here. It was unusual for it to be gone so long, because Basta didn't like to be away from the village for any length of time. Were he and Flatnose still lying in the ruined cottage, bound and gagged?

'Good! When do we start!' Farid sounded as if he wanted to get moving at once. 'After sunset? They'll all be in the church eating then.'

Dustfinger shooed a fly away from his binoculars. 'I'm going alone. You're to stay here and keep an eye on our things.'

'No!'

'Yes. This will be dangerous. There's someone I want to visit, and to do that I have to get into the yard behind Capricorn's house.'

The boy gazed at him with eyes full of astonishment. Eyes that sometimes looked as if they had seen too much already.

'Surprised, are you?' Dustfinger suppressed a smile. 'You wouldn't have thought I had any friends in Capricorn's house!'

The boy shrugged his shoulders and looked over to the village. A vehicle was driving into the car park, a dusty truck with two goats tethered on the open loading platform.

'Look at that – another farmer's lost his goats!' muttered Dustfinger. 'Wise of him to give them up freely, or there'd have been a note pinned to his stable door this evening.'

Farid looked at him, an unspoken question in his eyes.

'The *red rooster crows tomorrow*, that's what the note would say. It's the only thing Capricorn's men know how to write. But sometimes they just hang a dead rooster above the door. Anyone can understand that.'

'Red rooster?' The boy shook his head. 'Is it a curse or something?'

'No! Good heavens, you sound like Basta.' Dustfinger laughed quietly. Capricorn's men were getting out of the truck. The smaller of them was carrying two plastic bags filled to bursting; the other was hauling the goats off the loading platform. 'The red rooster means fire, the fire they'll light in the farmer's outhouses or olive groves. And sometimes the rooster crows in the attic of the house or, if a farmer has been particularly stubborn, in his children's bedroom. We almost all have something we love dearly.'

The men were leading the goats into the village. Dustfinger knew by his limp that one of them was Cockerell. He had often wondered whether Capricorn knew about all the little deals his men did, or whether they were working for themselves on the side now and then.

Farid caught a grasshopper in the hollow of his hand and watched it through his fingers. 'I'm going with you all the same,' he said.

'No.'

'I'm not afraid!'

'That makes it worse.'

Capricorn had had floodlights installed after the escape of his captives – outside the church, on the roof of his house and in the car park. They didn't exactly make it easier to walk the streets unobserved. The first night after their arrival here Dustfinger had stolen into the village, his scarred face blackened with soot because it was too easily recognisable. Capricorn had also reinforced the guards on sentry duty, probably because of all the treasure Silvertongue had brought him. By now, of course, that treasure had disappeared into the cellars of his house and was carefully locked in the heavy safes that Capricorn had fitted there. He didn't care to spend money; like the dragons of legend, he hoarded it. Sometimes he placed a ring on his finger, or put a necklace round the neck of a maid who happened to take his fancy. Or he sent Basta out to buy him a new sporting gun.

'Who are you going to meet?'

'None of your business.'

The boy let the grasshopper go again. It hopped rapidly away on its spindly olive-green legs.

'A woman,' said Dustfinger. 'One of Capricorn's maids. She's helped me a couple of times before.'

'The one in the photo in your rucksack?'

Dustfinger lowered his binoculars. 'How do you know what's in my rucksack?'

The boy hunched his head down between his shoulders, like someone used to being beaten for every thoughtless remark. 'I was looking for matches.'

'If I catch you with your fingers in my rucksack again I'll tell Gwin to bite them off.'

The boy grinned. 'Gwin never bites me.'

He was right. The marten was crazy about Farid.

'Where is that faithless animal anyway?' Dustfinger peered through the branches. 'I haven't seen him since yesterday.'

'I think he's found a female.' Farid picked up a stick and poked at the dead leaves that lay everywhere under the trees. By night the rustling leaves would give away anyone trying to steal up to their camp in silence. 'If you don't take me with you tonight,' said the boy, without looking at Dustfinger, 'I'll just follow you anyway.'

'If you follow me I shall beat you black and blue.'

Farid lowered his head and gazed inscrutably at his bare toes. Then he glanced at the ruined walls where they had made their camp.

'And don't start on about the old woman's ghost again!' said Dustfinger crossly. 'How often do I have to tell you? All the danger is over in those houses. Light a fire in the hollow if you're afraid of the dark.'

'Ghosts don't fear fire.' The boy's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

Sighing, Dustfinger clambered down from his look-out post. The boy was almost as bad as Basta. He wasn't afraid of curses, ladders or black cats, but he saw ghosts everywhere, and not just the ghost of the old woman now sleeping buried somewhere in the hard ground. Farid saw other ghosts and spirits too, whole armies of them: malignant, all-powerful

beings who tore the hearts out of poor mortal boys and ate them. He refused to believe it when Dustfinger told him they hadn't come with him, he had left them behind in a book along with the thieves who used to beat and kick him. He might well die of fear if he stayed here alone all night. 'Oh, very well then, you'd better come,' said Dustfinger. 'But not a squeak out of you, understand? The men down there aren't ghosts. They're real people, and they have knives and guns.'

Gratefully, Farid flung his thin arms around him.

'Yes, all right, that'll do!' said Dustfinger, pushing him away. 'Come on, let's see if you can stand on one hand yet.'

The boy immediately obeyed. Bright red in the face, he balanced first on his right hand and then on his left, bare legs up in the air. After three wobbly seconds he landed in the prickly leaves of a rockrose, but he promptly got up, pulled a few thorns out of his foot, and tried again.

Dustfinger sat down under a tree.

It was high time to get rid of the boy, but how? You could throw stones at a dog, but a boy ... Why hadn't he stayed with Silvertongue, who knew more about looking after young people? And it was Silvertongue, after all, who had brought him here. But no, the boy had to run after him, Dustfinger.

'I'm going to look for Gwin,' said Dustfinger, getting to his feet.

Without a word Farid trotted after him.



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Back Again

She spoke to the King, hoping he would forbid his son to go, but he said: ‘Well, dear, it’s true that adventures are good for people even when they are very young. Adventures can get into a person’s blood even if he doesn’t remember having them.’

**Eva Ibbotson,
*The Secret of Platform 13***

Capricorn’s village didn’t look like a dangerous place on the grey rainy day when Meggie set eyes on it again. The houses standing among the green hills were a miserable sight, with not a ray of sunlight to brighten their ruins. Meggie could hardly believe these same houses had looked so menacing on the night of their escape.

‘Interesting,’ whispered Fenoglio as Basta drove into the car park. ‘Do you know, this village is very like one of the settings I thought up for *Inkheart*? Well, there’s no fortress, but the landscape around is similiar, and the age of the village would be about right. Did you know that *Inkheart* is set in a world not unlike our own medieval times? Of course I added some things – the fairies and the giants.’

Meggie wasn’t really listening to him now. She remembered how, after their flight from the sheds where Capricorn had held them captive, she had stumbled towards Elinor’s car, and the

man had shot at them. She had hoped she would never again have to see this car park, the church and these hills.

‘Come on, get moving!’ grunted Flatnose, opening the car door. ‘I expect you remember the way.’

Oh yes, Meggie could remember – even though it did all seem rather different today. Fenoglio looked round the gloomy alleys like a tourist, staring at windows and open doors as if he’d paid for entry. ‘I know this village!’ he whispered to Meggie. ‘I mean, I’ve heard of it. There’s more than one sad story about the place. That earthquake in the last century, and then in the last war there was—’

‘Save your tongue for later, scribbler!’ Basta interrupted. ‘I don’t like whispering.’

Fenoglio shot him an angry glance but fell silent, and did not utter another sound until they had reached the church.

‘Well, go on, open the door. What are you waiting for?’ growled Flatnose.

With Fenoglio’s help, Meggie opened the heavy wooden door. The cool air that met them smelled as musty as on the day she had entered the church with Mo and Elinor. Nothing much had changed inside. The red walls looked even more threatening on this overcast day, and the expression on the doll-like face of Capricorn’s statue seemed rather more malevolent than before, if that were possible. The braziers in which the books had been burned still stood in the same place, but there was no sign of Capricorn’s chair at the top of the steps. Two of his men were just carrying a new chair up them. The old woman who looked like a magpie and whom Meggie didn’t really like to remember was standing beside them, impatiently giving directions.

Basta pushed aside two women who were kneeling in the middle of the nave cleaning the floor, and strode towards the altar steps. ‘Where’s Capricorn, Mortola?’ he called to the old woman as he approached. ‘I have news for him. Important news.’

The old woman didn't even turn towards him. 'Further to the right, you fools!' she ordered the two men who were still struggling with the heavy armchair. 'Yes, there, that'll do.' Then she turned towards Basta, her face expressionless.

'We expected you back before this,' she said.

'What do you mean?' Basta had raised his voice, but Meggie caught the uncertainty it revealed. It sounded almost as if he were afraid of the old woman. 'Do you know how many villages there are down this damn coast? And we weren't even sure whether Silvertongue was still in the area. But I can rely on my nose, and as you see,' he said, nodding in Meggie's direction, 'I've done the job.'

'You have?' The Magpie looked past Basta to where Meggie and Fenoglio were standing with Flatnose. 'All I see is the girl and an old man. Where's her father?'

'He wasn't there, but he'll come after her. The girl's the best bait we could have.'

'And how will he know she's here?'

'I left him a message.'

'Since when can you write?'

Meggie saw Basta's shoulders tense with anger. 'I left him my name. He won't need more than that to know where to find his precious little daughter. Tell Capricorn I'm shutting her in one of the cages.' With these words he turned on his heel and stalked back to Meggie and Fenoglio.

'Capricorn's not here and I don't know when he'll be back!' Mortola called after him. 'But I'm in charge until then, and in my view you've not been doing your job recently as well as we expect.'

Basta swung round as if he had been bitten in the back of the neck, but Mortola continued unmoved.

'First, you let Dustfinger steal a set of keys from you, then you lose our dogs and we have to send a search party out into

the mountains for you, and now this! Give me your keys.' The Magpie put out her hand.

'What?' Basta went white, like a boy being punished in front of the whole class.

'You heard. *I'm* going to look after them: the keys to the cages, the crypt and the fuel store. Bring them here.'

Basta didn't move. 'You've no right to them!' he snapped. 'Capricorn gave them to me, and he's the only one who can take them away again.' He turned away once more.

'And so he will!' Mortola called after him. 'And he'll expect your report as soon as he gets back. Maybe he'll understand better than I do why you didn't bring Silvertongue.'

Basta did not reply. Seizing Meggie and Fenoglio by the arm, he hauled them towards the church door. Mortola the Magpie called something after him, but Meggie couldn't make out what it was. And Basta did not turn back this time.

He locked her and Fenoglio in the shed marked number 5, the one where Farid had been imprisoned. 'Right, you can wait here till your father arrives!' he said before pushing Meggie inside.

She felt as if this were a nightmare and she was dreaming it all over again. Only here there wasn't even musty straw to sit on, and the light bulb hanging from the ceiling didn't work. However, a little daylight did come in through a narrow hole in the wall.

'Oh, wonderful!' said Fenoglio, sitting down on the cold floor with a sigh. 'A cowshed. How unimaginative. I really would have expected Capricorn at least to have a proper dungeon for his prisoners.'

'Cowshed?' Meggie leaned her back against the wall. She heard the rain pattering against the locked door.

'Well, yes, what did you think it was? They always built houses like this in the old days: room for the livestock on the

ground floor and living quarters for the family above them. They still keep their goats and donkeys like that in many mountain villages. Haven't you noticed when they've driven the animals out to pasture in the morning there are steaming heaps of dung left lying in the streets, and you tread in them when you go to buy your breakfast rolls?' Fenoglio plucked a hair from one nostril, looked at it as if he couldn't believe anything quite so bristly grew in his nose, and flicked it away. 'This is really rather uncanny,' he murmured. 'That's exactly how I imagined Capricorn's mother – that nose, the eyes set close together, even the way she folds her arms and her chin juts forward.'

Meggie looked at him incredulously. 'Capricorn's *mother!* The Magpie?'

'Magpie! Is that what you call her?' Fenoglio laughed softly. 'She has exactly the same nickname in my story. How amazing. Be careful of her. She's not a very pleasant character.'

'I thought she was his housekeeper.'

'That's probably what you're supposed to think. So keep our little secret to yourself for now, all right?'

Meggie agreed, although she didn't really understand. What did it matter who the old woman was? It all came to the same thing. This time there was no Dustfinger to open the door in the night. It had all been for nothing – as if they had never run away at all. She went over to the locked door and pressed her hands against it. 'He'll come,' she whispered. 'Mo will come, and then they'll lock us up here for ever and ever.'

Fenoglio got up and went over to her. 'There, there!' he said, putting his arms round her and letting her bury her face in his jacket. It was made of rough fabric and smelled of pipe tobacco. 'I'll think of something!' he whispered to Meggie. 'After all, I invented these villains. It'll be an odd thing if I can't get rid of them. Your father had an idea, but ...'

Meggie raised her face, wet with tears, and looked at him hopefully, but the old man shook his head. 'Later. Now, tell me what makes Capricorn so interested in your father. Is it something to do with the way he reads aloud?'

Meggie nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes. 'He wants Mo to read aloud to him here, to bring someone out of a book, an old friend.'

Fenoglio gave her a handkerchief. A few crumbs of tobacco fell from it when she blew her nose. 'A friend? Capricorn has no friends.' The old man frowned. Then Meggie felt him suddenly take a deep breath.

'Who is it?' she asked, but Fenoglio just mopped a tear off her cheek.

'Someone I hope you'll never meet except between the covers of a book,' he said evasively. Then he turned and began pacing up and down. 'Capricorn will be back soon,' he added. 'I must think how best to confront him.'

But Capricorn did not come. Darkness fell outside, and still no one had fetched them from their prison. They weren't even brought anything to eat. It grew cold when the night air came in through the hole in the wall, and they huddled side by side on the hard floor to keep warm.

'Is Basta still very superstitious?' Fenoglio asked at some time in the night.

'Yes, very,' replied Meggie. 'Dustfinger likes winding him up about it.'

'Good,' murmured Fenoglio. But he would say no more.



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33

Capricorn's Maid

As I never saw my father or my mother ... my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription 'Also Georgiana Wife of the Above' I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly.

Charles Dickens,
Great Expectations

Dustfinger set out when the night could grow no darker. The sky was overcast, with not a single star shining. Only the moon showed occasionally between the clouds, as thin as a slice of lemon.

Dustfinger was glad of such darkness, but the boy jumped whenever a twig brushed his face.

'For heaven's sake, I should have left you with the marten after all!' Dustfinger snapped as Farid clutched his arm in fright yet again. 'You'll give us away yet with your teeth chattering like that. Look ahead of you. That's what ought to scare you – guns, not ghosts.'

Before them, only a little way off now, lay Capricorn's village. The new floodlights poured light as bright as day over

the grey houses.

‘And they say that this electricity of theirs is a blessing!’ whispered Dustfinger as they skirted the car park. A bored-looking guard was strolling round among the parked vehicles. Yawning, he leaned against the truck in which Cockerell had brought the goats back that afternoon, and put on a pair of earphones.

‘Excellent! An army could march up now and he wouldn’t hear it!’ muttered Dustfinger. ‘If Basta were here he’d discipline the man for that – shut him up in Capricorn’s cowsheds for three days with nothing to eat.’

‘Why don’t we go over the rooftops?’ All the fear had gone from Farid’s face. The guard with his shotgun didn’t alarm the boy half as much as his imaginary ghosts. Dustfinger could only shake his head over such foolishness. But the rooftop idea wasn’t stupid. A vine that hadn’t been pruned for years grew up one of the houses beside the car park. As soon as the guard wandered over to the other side of the area, swaying in time to the music that was filling his ears, Dustfinger clambered up its woody branches. The boy climbed even better than he did, and proudly offered him a hand once he was up on the roof. They moved on stealthily like stray cats, past chimneys, aerials and Capricorn’s floodlights, which were angled downwards and left everything behind them in the cover of darkness. Once, a shingle came loose under Dustfinger’s boots, but he managed to catch it just in time, before the terracotta tile could fall and break in the street below.

When they reached the square where the church and Capricorn’s house stood they let themselves down from a gutter. For a few breathless moments Dustfinger ducked behind a stack of empty fruit crates, looking out for guards. Both the square itself and the narrow alley to one side of Capricorn’s house were bathed in light. A black cat was sitting on the edge of the well outside the church. Basta’s heart would probably have missed a beat at the sight of it, but Dustfinger was much more

concerned about the guards outside Capricorn's house. Two of them were lounging by the entrance. It was one of these, a small, sturdy man, who had found Dustfinger four years ago in a town up in the north, just as he was about to give his last show. He and two companions had dragged the fire-eater back here, where Capricorn had, in his own characteristic way, questioned him about Silvertongue and the book.

The two guards were arguing, and as they were so absorbed Dustfinger plucked up his courage, took a few rapid steps, and disappeared down the alley beside Capricorn's house. Farid followed him, as soundless as his own shadow come to life.

Capricorn's house was a large, bulky building which might once have been the village hall, a disused monastery or a school. All the windows were dark, and there were no other guards to be seen in the alley. But Dustfinger remained watchful. He knew the guards liked to lurk in dark doorways, invisible as ravens at night in their black suits. Indeed, Dustfinger knew almost everything about Capricorn's village. He had walked these streets often enough since Capricorn brought him here to look for Silvertongue and the book. Whenever he felt the sharp pangs of homesickness he had come back here to his old enemies, where he didn't feel quite so out of place. Even his fear of Basta's knife couldn't keep him away.

Dustfinger picked up a flat stone, beckoned Farid to his side, and threw the stone down the alley. Nothing moved. As he had hoped, the guard was doing his rounds. Dustfinger hurried to the high wall behind which Capricorn's garden lay: vegetable beds, fruit trees and herbs, protected by the wall from the cold wind that sometimes blew from the nearby mountains. Dustfinger had often entertained the maids as they hoed the beds. There were no floodlights in the garden, no guards either – who'd steal vegetables? – and only a door with a grating over it, a door that was locked at night, that led from the yard into the house. The dog kennels lay beyond the wall too, but when Dustfinger swung himself up and over they were empty. The

dogs had not come back from the hills. They'd shown more sense than Dustfinger expected, and Basta obviously hadn't got new dogs yet. Stupid of him. Stupid Basta.

Dustfinger signalled to the boy to follow him, and stole past the carefully tended beds until he had reached the back door with the grating. The boy looked at him questioningly when he saw the solid bars, but Dustfinger just laid a finger to his lips and looked up at one of the windows on the second floor. The shutters, black as night, were open. Dustfinger mewed in so lifelike a fashion that several cats answered, but nothing moved behind the window. Dustfinger cursed under his breath, listened to the sounds of the night for a moment, then imitated the shrill cry of a bird of prey. Farid jumped and pressed close to the wall of the house. This time, something did move behind the upstairs window. A woman leaned out of it. When Dustfinger waved to her she waved back – and then quickly disappeared.

'Don't look like that!' whispered Dustfinger, seeing Farid's anxious glance. 'We can trust her. Quite a few of the women aren't too fond of Capricorn and his men – many of them didn't even come here of their own free will. But they're all afraid of him: afraid they'll lose their job, afraid he'll burn the roofs over the heads of their families if they talk about what goes on here, or perhaps send Basta to call on them with his knife. Resa doesn't have to worry about that kind of thing. She has no family.' Not any more, he added to himself silently.

The door behind the grating opened, and Resa's anxious face appeared behind the bars. It looked pale beneath her dark blonde hair.

'How are you?' Dustfinger went over to the grating and put his hand through the bars. Smiling, Resa pressed it, and nodded at the boy.

'This is Farid.' Dustfinger lowered his voice. 'You could say he's adopted me. But you can trust him. He doesn't care for

Capricorn any more than we do.'

Resa nodded, looked at him reproachfully and shook her head.

'Yes, I know it wasn't sensible to come back. You heard what happened?' Dustfinger couldn't prevent something like pride creeping into his voice. 'They thought I'd put up with anything, but they were wrong. There's still one copy of the book left, and I'm going to get my hands on it. Don't look at me like that. Do you know where Capricorn keeps it?'

Resa shook her head. There was a rustling behind them and Dustfinger spun round, but it was only a mouse scurrying over the quiet yard. Resa took a pencil and a piece of paper out of her dressing-gown pocket. She wrote slowly and neatly, knowing that Dustfinger found it easier to read capital letters. She had taught him to read and write so that they could communicate with one another.

As usual, it took some time for the letters to make sense to Dustfinger. He felt a fresh sense of pride every time those spindly symbols finally fitted together into words and he could prise their secret out of them. '*I'll look around,*' he read softly. 'Good. But be careful. I don't want you risking your pretty neck.' He bent over the paper again. 'What do you mean, *The Magpie has Basta's keys now?*'

He gave her the note back. Farid watched Resa writing, as spellbound as if he were watching someone work magic. 'I think you'll have to teach him too!' Dustfinger whispered through the bars. 'See how he's staring at you?'

Resa looked up and smiled at Farid. Awkwardly, he looked away. Resa passed her finger round her face.

'You think he's a nice boy?' Dustfinger twisted his mouth in a teasing smile, while Farid felt so embarrassed he didn't know where to look. 'And what about me? Beautiful as the moon, am I? Hmm, what am I to make of that as a compliment? You mean I have almost as many craters?'

Resa pressed her hand over her lips. It was easy to amuse her; she laughed like a young girl. That was the only time you could hear her voice.

Shots rang out in the night. Resa clung to the bars, and Farid, terrified, crouched down at the foot of the wall. Dustfinger pulled him to his feet again. 'It's nothing!' he whispered. 'Just the guards taking pot-shots at cats. They always do that when they're bored.'

The boy looked at him with disbelief, but Resa went on writing. 'She *took the keys away to punish him*,' Dustfinger read. 'Basta won't like that at all. The way he acted with those keys, you'd have thought he was looking after Capricorn's most treasured possession.'

Resa mimed taking a knife from her belt, looking so grim that Dustfinger almost laughed out loud. He quickly glanced around, but the yard was silent as the grave between its high walls. 'Oh yes, I can well imagine that Basta's furious,' he whispered. 'In that mood he'll do anything to please Capricorn – slit throats, gash faces open, anything.'

Resa reached for the paper again, and once more it took him a painfully long time to decipher her clear, neat writing. 'Oh, so you've heard about Silvertongue. You want to know who he is? Well, but for me he'd still be locked up in Capricorn's sheds. What else? Ask Farid. Silvertongue plucked the boy out of his own story, too, like a ripe apple. Luckily, he didn't bring out any of the ghouls the boy keeps carrying on about. Yes, he reads aloud very well indeed, much better than Darius. As you can see, Farid doesn't limp, his face probably always looked the way it does now, and he still has his voice too – even if you might not think so at the moment.'

Farid cast him an angry glance.

'What does Silvertongue look like? Well, I can at least tell you that Basta hasn't decorated *his* face yet.'

A shutter creaked above them. Dustfinger pressed close to the grating. Only the wind, he thought, nothing but the wind. Farid was staring at him, eyes wide with fear. No doubt the creaking sounded to him like a demon, but the figure who leaned out of the window above them was a creature of flesh and blood: Mortola, or the Magpie as she was secretly nicknamed. She was in charge of all the maids, and nothing was safe from the Magpie's eyes and ears, not even the secrets the women whispered to each other in their bedrooms at night. Even Capricorn's strongboxes had better accommodation than his maidservants. They all slept in his house, four to a room, crammed in like sardines (except for those who had struck up a relationship with one of his men and moved to another house).

The Magpie leaned over the windowsill and breathed in the cool night air. She stayed there for what seemed an endless time, so long that Dustfinger could happily have wrung her neck, but finally she appeared to have filled every inch of her body with fresh air and closed the window.

'I must go, but I'll be back tomorrow evening. Maybe you'll have found out something about the book by then.' Dustfinger squeezed Resa's hand. Her fingers were rough from laundry work and cleaning. 'I know I've said it before, but all the same – be careful, and keep away from Basta.' Resa shrugged her shoulders. How else could she respond to such unnecessary advice? Almost all the women in the village kept away from Basta, but he didn't keep away from them.

Dustfinger waited outside the grating until Resa was back in her room. She signalled to him through the window with a candle.

The guard in the car park still had his earphones on. Deep in his own thoughts, he was dancing among the cars, shotgun in his outstretched arms as if he were dancing with a girl. By the time he finally looked their way, the night had already swallowed up Dustfinger and Farid.

They met no one on the way back to their hiding-place, only a fox who slunk away with hunger in his eyes. Gwin was eating a bird inside the walls of the burnt-out cottage. Its feathers were shadows in the darkness.

‘Has she always been mute?’ asked the boy as Dustfinger lay down under the trees to sleep.

‘As long as I’ve known her,’ replied Dustfinger, turning his back to the boy. Farid lay down beside him. He had made this his habit from the first, and however often Dustfinger moved away the boy was always close beside him when he woke up.

‘The photograph in your rucksack,’ he said. ‘It is her.’

‘So?’

The boy did not reply.

‘If you’ve taken a fancy to her,’ Dustfinger mocked him, ‘forget it. She’s one of Capricorn’s favourite maids. She’s even allowed to take his breakfast and help him get dressed.’

‘How long has she been with him?’

‘Five years,’ said Dustfinger. ‘And in all that time Capricorn has never once let her leave the village. She can’t even go out of the house very often. She ran away twice, but she never got far. One of those times a snake bit her. She never told me how Capricorn punished her, but I know she never tried to run away again.’

There was a rustling behind them. Farid jumped, but it was only Gwin. The marten was licking his muzzle as he leaped and landed on the boy’s stomach. Laughing, Farid plucked a feather out of his fur. Gwin snuffled busily around the boy’s chin and nose, as if he had missed him, and then he disappeared into the night again.

‘He really is a nice marten!’ whispered Farid.

‘No, he’s not,’ said Dustfinger, pulling his thin blanket up to his chin. ‘He probably likes you because you smell like a girl.’

Farid’s only answer was a long silence.

‘She looks like her,’ he said at last, just as Dustfinger was dropping off to sleep. ‘Silvertongue’s daughter, I mean. She has the same mouth and the same eyes, and she laughs in the same way.’

‘Nonsense!’ said Dustfinger. ‘There’s not the slightest resemblance. They both have blue eyes, that’s all. It’s not unusual here. Hurry up and go to sleep.’

The boy obeyed. He wrapped himself in the sweater that Dustfinger had given him and turned his back to his companion. Soon he was breathing as peacefully as a baby. But Dustfinger lay awake all night, staring at the stars.



34

Capricorn's Secrets

‘If I were to be made a knight,’ said the Wart, staring dreamily into the fire, ‘I should ... pray to God to let me encounter all the evil in the world in my own person, so that if I conquered there would be none left, and, if I were defeated, I would be the one to suffer for it.’

‘That would be extremely presumptuous of you,’ said Merlin, ‘and you would be conquered, and you would suffer for it.’

**T.H. White,
*The Sword in the Stone***

Capricorn received Meggie and Fenoglio in the church. About a dozen of his men were with him. He was sitting in the new black leather armchair they had installed under Mortola’s supervision, and this time, for once, his suit was not red but pale yellow, like the morning daylight filtering in through the windows. He had them brought to him early, while the mist still hung above the hills, with the sun swimming in it like a ball floating in murky water.

‘By all the letters of the alphabet!’ whispered Fenoglio as he and Meggie walked down the nave of the church with Basta close behind them. ‘He really does look exactly the way I imagined him. “Colourless as a glass of milk.” I think that’s how I put it.’

He began walking faster, as if he couldn't wait to see his creation at close quarters. Meggie could hardly keep up with him, and Basta held him back before he had reached the steps. 'Here, what's the idea?' he hissed. 'Not so fast – and bow, understand?'

Fenoglio merely glanced scornfully at him and remained perfectly upright. Basta raised his hand, but when Capricorn almost imperceptibly shook his head he lowered it again like a rebuked child. Mortola was standing beside Capricorn's chair, her arms folded like wings behind her back.

'You know, Basta, I still wonder what you were thinking of not to bring her father too!' said Capricorn, letting his gaze wander from Meggie to Fenoglio's turtle-like face.

'He wasn't there. I told you.' Basta sounded injured. 'Was I supposed to sit about waiting for him like a toad beside a pond? He'll soon be here of his own accord! We all know how besotted he is with his daughter. I'll bet my knife he'll be here by tomorrow at the latest!'

'Your knife? But you've already mislaid your knife once recently.' The mockery in Mortola's voice made Basta grind his teeth.

'You're slipping, Basta!' remarked Capricorn. 'Your hot temper clouds your judgement. But let's move on to this other souvenir of yours.'

Fenoglio had never taken his eyes off Capricorn. He was looking at him like a painter seeing one of his pictures again after many long years, and judging by the expression on his face what he saw pleased him. Meggie couldn't see a trace of fear in his eyes, just incredulous curiosity, and satisfaction – with himself. She also saw that Capricorn did not care for that expression at all. He wasn't used to being inspected as fearlessly as this old man was scrutinising him now, not even by his men.

'Basta has told me some strange things about you, Signor ...?' 'Fenoglio.'

Meggie was watching Capricorn's face. Had he ever read the name on the cover of *Inkheart* just below the title itself?

'Even his voice sounds the way I imagined!' Fenoglio whispered to her. She thought he was captivated, like a child looking at a caged lion – except that Capricorn wasn't in a cage. At a signal from him Basta jammed his elbow into the old man's back so roughly that Fenoglio was left gasping for air.

'I don't like whispering in my presence,' Capricorn said softly, while Fenoglio was still struggling to get his breath back. 'As I said, Basta has told me a strange story – he says you claimed to be the man who wrote a certain book – what was its name again?'

'*Inkheart*.' Fenoglio rubbed his aching back. 'Its title is *Inkheart* because it's about a man whose wicked heart is black as ink, filled with darkness and evil. I still like the title.'

Capricorn raised his eyebrows – and smiled. 'And how am I supposed to take that? As a compliment, maybe? After all, it's my story you're talking about.'

'No, no, it's mine. You just appear in it.'

Meggie saw Basta look enquiringly at Capricorn, but he shook his head again very slightly, and Fenoglio's back was spared for the time being.

'How interesting. So you're sticking to your lies.' Capricorn uncrossed his legs and rose from his chair. With slow strides, he came down the steps.

Fenoglio smiled conspiratorially at Meggie.

'What are you grinning for?' Capricorn's voice was as sharp as Basta's knife now. He stopped right in front of Fenoglio.

'Oh, I was only thinking that vanity is one of the qualities I gave you, vanity and –' Fenoglio paused for effect before continuing – 'and a few other weaknesses that I expect you'd rather I didn't mention in front of your henchmen.'

Capricorn examined him in silence, a silence that seemed to last an eternity. Then he smiled. It was a faint, thin smile, little more than a lift at the corners of his mouth, while his eyes scanned the church as if he had entirely forgotten Fenoglio. 'You're a shameless old man,' he said. 'And a liar into the bargain. But if you hope to impress me with your bare-faced lying and boasting the way you've impressed Basta, I must disappoint you. Your claims are ridiculous, just as you are, and it was more than stupid of Basta to bring you here, because now we have to get rid of you somehow.'

Basta turned pale. He hurried over to Capricorn, head lowered in submission. 'But suppose he isn't lying?' Meggie heard him whisper to Capricorn. 'They both say we shall all die if we touch the old man.'

Capricorn gave him a look of such contempt that Basta flinched backwards as if he had been struck.

Fenoglio, however, looked as if he were enjoying himself hugely. It seemed to Meggie that he was watching the whole scene as if it were a play performed especially for him. 'Poor Basta!' he said to Capricorn. 'You're doing him a great injustice again, for he's right. Suppose I'm not lying? Suppose I really did invent you both – you and Basta? Will you simply dissolve into thin air if you do anything to me? It seems very likely.'

Capricorn laughed, but Meggie sensed he was thinking over what Fenoglio had said, and it made him uneasy – even if he was taking great pains to hide his concern under a mask of indifference.

'I can prove that I'm what I say I am!' said Fenoglio, so quietly that apart from Capricorn only Basta could hear his words. 'Shall I do it here, in front of your men and those women? Shall I tell them about your parents?'

All was quiet in the church now. No one moved, neither Basta nor the other men waiting at the foot of the steps. Even the women cleaning the floor under the tables straightened up

to look at Capricorn and the strange old man. Mortola was standing beside his chair, her chin jutting as if that would help her to hear what they were whispering about.

Capricorn inspected his cufflinks in silence. They were like drops of blood on his pale shirt. Then, at last, he turned his colourless eyes to Fenoglio's face again.

'Say what you like, old man! But if you value your life say it so that only I can hear.' He spoke softly, but Meggie heard the fury in his voice, suppressed with difficulty but lurking behind every word. She had never felt more afraid of him.

Capricorn signed to Basta, who reluctantly took a few steps backwards.

'I suppose the child can hear what I have to say?' asked Fenoglio, putting his hand on Meggie's shoulder. 'Or are you afraid of her too?'

Capricorn did not even look at Meggie. He had eyes only for the old man who had invented him. 'Well, come on, let's hear you, even if you have nothing to say! You're not the first person to try saving his skin in this church with a few lies, but if you hedge your bets any longer I shall tell Basta to wrap a pretty little viper around your neck. I always keep a few around the place for such occasions.'

Even this threat didn't particularly impress Fenoglio. 'Very well,' he said, looking all round him as if sorry not to have a larger audience, 'where shall I begin? First, something basic: a storyteller never writes down everything he knows about his characters. There's no need for readers to know everything. Some of it is better kept secret between the author and his creations. Take him, for instance,' he added, pointing to Basta. 'I always knew he was a very unhappy boy before you picked him up. As it says in another very fine book, it's terribly easy to persuade children that they are worthless. Basta was convinced of it. Not that you taught him any better, oh no! Why would you? But suddenly here was someone to whom he could

devote himself, someone who told him what to do – he'd found a god, Capricorn, and if you treated him badly, well, who says that all gods are kindly? Most of them are stern and cruel, wouldn't you agree? I didn't write all this in the book. I knew it, that was enough. But never mind Basta now, let's move on to you.'

Capricorn's eyes did not move from Fenoglio. His face was as rigid as if it had turned to stone.

'*Capricorn.*' Fenoglio's voice sounded almost tender as he spoke the name. He gazed over Capricorn's shoulder as if he had forgotten that the man he was talking about was standing right in front of him, and no longer existed only in an entirely different world between the covers of a book. 'He has another name too, of course, but even he doesn't remember it. He has called himself Capricorn since he was fifteen, after the star sign under which he was born. Capricorn the unapproachable, unfathomable, insatiable, who likes to play God or the Devil as the fancy takes him. The Devil doesn't have a mother, though, does he?' Fenoglio then looked Capricorn in the eye. 'But *you* do.'

Meggie looked up at the Magpie. She had come to the edge of the steps, listening, her bony hands clenched into fists.

'You like to spread the rumour that she was of noble birth,' Fenoglio went on. 'Indeed, it sometimes even pleases you to say she was a king's daughter, and your father, you claim, was an armourer at her father's court. A very nice story too. Shall I tell you my version?'

For the first time, Meggie saw something like fear on Capricorn's face, a nameless fear without beginning or end, and behind it hatred rose like a vast black shadow.

Meggie felt sure that Capricorn wanted to strike Fenoglio to the ground, but his fear was too strong, leaving him helpless to act.

Did Fenoglio see that too?

‘Go on, tell your story. Why not?’ Capricorn’s eyes were unblinking, like a snake’s.

Fenoglio smiled as mischievously as one of his grandsons. ‘Very well, let’s go on. The tale of the court armourer was all lies, of course.’ Meggie still had a feeling that the old man was enjoying himself enormously. He might have been teasing a kitten. Did he know so little about his own creation? ‘Capricorn’s father was an ordinary blacksmith,’ he went on, refusing to let the cold rage in Capricorn’s eyes distract him. ‘He made his son play with hot coals, and sometimes he beat him almost as hard as he beat the iron he forged. There were blows if the boy ever showed pity, and more blows for shedding tears and for every time the lad said, “I can’t” or “I’ll never do it”. “Power is all that counts,” he taught his son. “Rules are made by the strongest, so be sure that you’re the one who makes them.” Capricorn’s mother thought that was the only real truth in the world, and she told her son day in, day out that one day he would be the strongest of all. She was no princess but a serving maid, with coarse hands and roughened knees, and she followed her son like a shadow, even when he began to be ashamed of her and invented a new mother and new father for himself. She admired him for his cruelty; she loved to see the terror he spread abroad. And she loved his ink-black heart. Your heart is a stone, Capricorn, a black stone with about as much human sympathy as a lump of coal, and you are very, very proud of that.’

Capricorn went on playing with his cufflink, turning it round and looking at it as intently as if he were giving all his attention not to Fenoglio’s words but to the little red piece of metal. When the old man fell silent, Capricorn carefully pulled the sleeve of his jacket down over his wrist and brushed a speck of fluff off his arm. With it, he seemed to have brushed off his anger – his pale, indifferent eyes no longer showed rage, hatred or fear.

‘That really is an amazing story, old man,’ he said in a quiet voice. ‘I like it. You’re a born liar, so I shall keep you here – for the time being – until I tire of your stories.’

‘Keep me here?’ Fenoglio stood very straight. ‘I’ve no intention of staying here! What on earth—’

But Capricorn put a hand over his mouth. ‘Not another word!’ he hissed. ‘Basta has told me about your three grandchildren.’

If you give me any trouble, or tell your lies not to me but to my men, I shall get Basta to gift-wrap a few young vipers and leave them outside your grandchildren’s door. Do I make myself clear, old man?’

Fenoglio’s head drooped as if Capricorn had broken his neck with nothing but a few softly spoken words. When he looked up again, fear showed in every wrinkle of his face.

With a satisfied smile, Capricorn put his hands in his trouser pockets. ‘Yes, you all love something, soft-hearted as you are,’ he said. ‘Children, grandchildren, brothers and sisters, parents, dogs, cats, canary birds ... There are no exceptions: farmers, shopkeepers, even policemen have families or at least keep a dog. You have only to look at her father!’ Capricorn pointed at Meggie so suddenly, she jumped. ‘He’ll come here even though he knows I shan’t let him go again, any more than I shall let his daughter go. He’ll come all the same. Isn’t this world an amazing place?’

‘Amazing indeed,’ murmured Fenoglio, and for the first time he looked at his creation with revulsion rather than admiration. Capricorn seemed to prefer that.

‘Basta!’ he called, beckoning him. Basta strolled over deliberately slowly. He was still looking sulky. ‘Take the old man to the room where we once locked Darius,’ Capricorn ordered. ‘And post a guard outside the door.’

‘You want me to take him into *your* house?’ Basta sounded surprised.

‘Yes, why not? After all, he claims to be almost like a father to me. Anyway, his tales amuse me.’

Basta shrugged and grasped Fenoglio’s arm. Meggie looked at the old man, horrified. She would soon be all alone with nothing but the windowless walls and a locked door. But Fenoglio reached for her hand before Basta could haul him away. ‘Leave the girl with me,’ he said to Capricorn. ‘You can’t shut her up in that hole again all by herself. And I promised her father I’d look after her.’

Capricorn turned his back, looking indifferent. ‘As you like. Her father will be here soon in any case.’

Yes, Mo would come. Meggie could think of nothing else as Fenoglio led her away with him, his arm round her shoulders as if he really could protect her from Capricorn and Basta and all the others. But he couldn’t. Would Mo be able to protect her? Of course not. He mustn’t come, she thought. Please. Perhaps he won’t be able to find the way again! He mustn’t come. Yet there was nothing she wanted more, nothing in the whole wide world.



35

Different Aims

Faber sniffed the book. 'Do you know that books smell like nutmeg or some spice from a foreign land? I loved to smell them when I was a boy.'

Ray Bradbury,
Fahrenheit 451

It was Farid who saw the car. Dustfinger was lying under the trees as it came along the road. He was trying to think clearly, but since learning that Capricorn was back he couldn't pull his thoughts together. He still didn't know where to look for the book. The leaves of the trees cast shadows on his face, the sun sent white-hot needles down through the branches, and his forehead felt feverish. Basta and Flatnose were back too, of course. What had he expected? Had he thought they'd stay away for ever? 'Why get so agitated, Dustfinger?' he whispered up at the leaves. 'You didn't have to come back here. You knew it would be dangerous.' Then he heard footsteps approaching, rapidly.

'A grey car!' Farid had run so fast that he was gasping for breath as he flung himself down on the grass beside Dustfinger. 'I think it's Silvertongue!'

Dustfinger jumped up. The boy knew what he was talking about. He really could tell those stinking metal beetles apart from each other. He himself had never got the knack of it.

He quickly followed Farid to where there was a view of the bridge. The road wound away from it towards Capricorn's village like a slow-moving snake. They didn't have much time if they wanted to stop Silvertongue. At top speed, they stumbled down the hillside. Farid was the first to reach the road. Dustfinger had always been proud of his own agility, but the boy was far nimbler, fast as a deer and with legs just as agile. And he was getting better at playing with fire now too, as fascinated as a boy with a puppy.

Silvertongue braked sharply when he saw Dustfinger and Farid in the road. He looked tired, as if he had slept badly for the last few nights. Elinor was in the car beside him. Where had she sprung from? Hadn't she gone home to her book-lined tomb? And where was Meggie?

Silvertongue's face darkened when he saw Dustfinger. As he got out of the car he was rigid with anger. 'Of course! *You* told them!' he cried, coming towards him. 'You told them where we were! Who else? What did Capricorn promise you this time?'

'I told who what?' Dustfinger retreated. 'I never told anyone anything! Ask the boy.'

But Silvertongue didn't so much as glance at Farid. The bookworm woman had got out too. She stood beside the car looking grim.

'The only person who told anyone anything was you!' Dustfinger accused him. 'You told the old man about me even though you promised you wouldn't.'

Silvertongue stopped in his tracks. It was so easy to make him feel guilty.

'Better hide the car under the trees there.' Dustfinger pointed to the side of the road. 'One of Capricorn's men could pass at any time, and they don't like to see strange cars here.'

Silvertongue turned and looked down the road.

‘Surely you don’t believe him?’ cried Elinor. ‘Of course he’s given you away, who else could? The man starts telling lies the moment he opens his mouth.’

‘Basta took Meggie away.’ Silvertongue sounded hoarse, quite unlike himself, as if when he lost his daughter he had lost the sound of his voice too. ‘They took Fenoglio as well – yesterday morning when I went to meet Elinor at the airport. We’ve been looking for the wretched village ever since. I had no idea how many deserted villages there are in these hills. It wasn’t until we came to the barrier over the road that I felt sure we were on the right track at last.’

Dustfinger said nothing, but looked up at the sky. A few birds as black as Capricorn’s men were flying south. He had not seen them bringing the girl in, but then he hadn’t spent the whole day watching that accursed village.

‘Basta was gone for several days. I thought he must be looking for the two of you,’ he said. ‘You’re lucky he didn’t get hold of you too.’

‘Lucky?’ Elinor was still standing beside the car. ‘Tell him to get out of the way!’ she told Silvertongue. ‘Or I’ll run him down myself! He’s been hand in glove with those miserable fire-raisers all along.’

Silvertongue was still looking at Dustfinger as if he couldn’t decide whether or not to believe him. ‘Capricorn’s men broke into Elinor’s house,’ he said at last. ‘They took all the books from her library into the garden and burned them.’

Dustfinger had to admit that for a split second he felt something almost like satisfaction. What had the silly bookworm woman expected? Did she think Capricorn would simply forget her? He shrugged his shoulders and looked at Elinor, his face unreadable. ‘Only to be expected,’ he said.

‘Only to be expected!’ Elinor’s voice almost cracked. Belligerent as a bull terrier, she marched up to him. Farid tried to bar her way, but she pushed him aside so roughly that he fell

on the hot asphalt of the road. 'Maybe you can fool the boy with your fire-breathing and your coloured balls, matchstick-eater!' she snapped at Dustfinger. 'But it won't work with me! There's nothing left of the books in my library but a load of ash. The police were full of admiration for what those villains had done. "At least they didn't burn your house down, Signora Loredan! Even your garden is all right except for the scorch mark on the lawn." What do I care for the house? What do I care for the wretched lawn? They burned my most valuable books!'

Dustfinger saw the tears in her eyes, although she quickly turned her face aside, and suddenly something like sympathy did awake in him. Perhaps she was more like him than he'd thought: her home too had consisted of paper and printer's ink. She probably felt as lost as he did in the real world. He didn't let her see his sympathy, of course, but hid it behind a mask of mockery and indifference, just as she hid her despair behind rage. 'What did you expect? Capricorn knew where you lived. Anyone could foresee that he'd send his men out when you've escaped him. He always takes revenge.'

'Oh yes, and who told him where I live? You did!' Elinor swung her arm back with her fist clenched, but Farid caught it. He had grazed his knee on the road. 'He didn't give anything away!' he cried. 'Nothing at all. He's only here to steal something.'

Elinor lowered her arm.

'So that's it!' Silvertongue went up to them. 'You're here to get hold of the book. That's crazy!'

'Well, how about you? What are *you* planning to do?' Dustfinger looked at him scornfully. 'You're just going to walk into Capricorn's church and ask for your daughter back, are you?'

Silvertongue did not reply.

‘He won’t hand her over and you know it!’ Dustfinger went on. ‘She’s only the bait, and as soon as you’ve swallowed it the pair of you will be Capricorn’s prisoners – for the rest of your lives, most likely.’

‘I wanted to call the police!’ Elinor freed her arm crossly from Farid’s brown hands. ‘But Mortimer was against it.’

‘Sensible of him! Capricorn would have abandoned Meggie up in the mountains and you’d never have seen her again.’

Silvertongue looked up at the nearby mountains looming dark behind their foothills. ‘Wait until I’ve stolen the book!’ said Dustfinger. ‘I’m going to creep into the village again tonight. I won’t be able to get your daughter out the way I did last time, because Capricorn has trebled the guards, and the whole village is lit up at night now, brighter than a jeweller’s shop window, but perhaps I can find out where they’re keeping her prisoner. Then you can do what you like with the information. And in return for my trouble you could try reading me back into the book. What about it?’

Dustfinger considered this a very reasonable proposition, but Silvertongue thought it over only briefly before shaking his head. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I’m sorry, I can’t wait any longer. Meggie needs me.’ With these words he turned and went back to the car, but before he could get in Dustfinger barred his way.

‘I’m sorry too,’ he said, snapping open Basta’s knife. ‘You know I don’t like these things, but sometimes people have to be protected from their own stupidity. I’m not going to let you stumble into the village like a rabbit into a trap, just for Capricorn to shut you and your magic voice away. It won’t help your daughter and it certainly won’t help me.’

At Dustfinger’s signal, Farid had drawn his knife too. Dustfinger had bought it for him in the village by the sea; it was a ridiculous little thing, but Farid pressed it into Elinor’s ribs so hard that she grimaced. ‘Good God, are you planning to slit me

open, you little wretch?’ she snapped at him. The boy jumped, but he did not remove his knife.

‘Move the car off the road, Silvertongue!’ ordered Dustfinger. ‘And don’t get any silly ideas: the boy will keep his knife pressed at your bookworm friend’s chest until you’re back here with us.’

Silvertongue obeyed. Of course. What else could he do? They tied him and Elinor to the trees just behind the burnt-out cottage, only a few paces from their own makeshift camp. Elinor scolded even louder than Gwin when he was pulled out of the rucksack by his tail.

‘Stop that!’ Dustfinger told her. ‘It won’t do any of us any good for Capricorn’s men to find us here.’ That worked. She fell silent at once, as if she had swallowed her tongue. Silvertongue had leaned his head back against the tree trunk and closed his eyes. Farid checked all the knots again carefully, but then Dustfinger beckoned him over.

‘I want you to keep a watch on those two when I go down to the village tonight,’ he whispered. ‘And don’t start carrying on about ghosts again. After all, you won’t be alone this time.’

The boy looked at him with an injured expression, as if Dustfinger had taken his hand and thrust it into the fire. ‘But they’re tied up!’ he protested. ‘So what is there to watch? No one’s ever managed to undo my knots. Word of honour. Please. I want to go with you! I can be your look-out or distract the guards. I can even get into Capricorn’s house! I’m quieter than Gwin!’

But Dustfinger shook his head. ‘No,’ he said firmly. ‘Tonight I’m going alone. If I want someone following me wherever I go I’ll get myself a dog.’ And with that he left the boy.

It was a hot day. The sky above the hills was blue and cloudless, and there were hours yet to pass before darkness fell.



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36

In Capricorn's House

'It's the place that worries you,' said Hazel. 'I don't like it myself, but it won't go on for ever.'

**Richard Adams,
*Watership Down***

Two narrow metal bunks, one above the other against a whitewashed wall, a cupboard, a table by the window, a chair, an empty shelf with nothing but a candle on it. Meggie had hoped to be able to see the road or at least the car park through the window, but the only view was of the yard below. A couple of Capricorn's maids were bending over the vegetable patch pulling out weeds, and chickens were pecking about in a wire-netting run in one corner. The walls surrounding the kitchen garden were high enough for a prison.

Fenoglio was sitting on the lower bed, staring gloomily at the dusty floor. The wooden floorboards creaked whenever they stepped on them. Outside the door, Flatnose was protesting to Basta.

'You want me to do what? No, find someone else for the job, dammit! I'd rather go over to the next village, put petrol-soaked rags outside someone's door or hang a dead rooster from the window-frame. Or run round outside the house with a devil mask on, like Cockerell had to do last month, but I'm not cooling my heels here just to keep watch on an old man and a

little girl! Get one of the lads. They'll be glad to have a change from cleaning cars.'

But Basta wasn't open to persuasion. 'You'll be relieved after supper,' he said, and then he was gone. Meggie heard his footsteps retreating down the long corridor. There were five doors to pass, then go down the staircase, at the foot of the stairs turn left for the front door ... She had carefully taken note of the way. But how was she to get past Flatnose? She went over to the window again and opened it. Just looking out made her feel dizzy. No, she couldn't climb down. She'd break her neck.

'Leave the window open,' said Fenoglio behind her. 'It's so hot in here I feel as if I might melt.'

Meggie sat down on the bed beside him. 'I'm going to run away,' she whispered. 'As soon as it gets dark.'

The old man looked at her incredulously, shaking his head very firmly. 'Are you mad? It's much too dangerous!'

Out in the corridor, Flatnose was still muttering angrily to himself.

'I'll say I have to go to the loo.' Meggie was clutching her rucksack. 'Then I'll just run off.'

Fenoglio took her by the shoulders. 'No!' he whispered emphatically. 'No, you won't! We'll think of something. Thinking up ideas is my job, remember?'

Meggie tightened her lips. 'Yes, all right,' she murmured, getting up to go back to the window. Dusk was already falling outside. I'm going to try, all the same, she thought as Fenoglio stretched out with a sigh on the narrow bed behind her. I'm not just going to sit here like bait! I shall run away before they catch Mo too.

And for the hundredth time, as she waited for darkness, she tried to push away the question that kept coming into her head: where was Mo? Why hadn't he come?



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37

Carelessness

‘You think this is a trap, then?’ the Count asked.

‘I always think everything is a trap until proven otherwise,’ the Prince answered. ‘Which is why I’m still alive.’

William Goldman,
The Princess Bride

It was still hot when the sun had gone down. There was not a breath of wind in the darkness, and the glow-worms were dancing above the dry grass as Dustfinger crept back to Capricorn’s village.

Two guards were strolling around the car park, and neither of them was wearing earphones, so Dustfinger took a different route to Capricorn’s house this time. The streets at the far end of the village had been so utterly destroyed by the earthquake which drove out the last villagers that Capricorn had not had them rebuilt. These streets were still blocked by the rubble of ruined walls, and it wasn’t very safe to walk there. Even after so many years, loose stones might fall. So Capricorn’s men avoided that part of the village, where dirty dishes left by its long-gone inhabitants still stood on many tables behind dilapidated front doors. There were no floodlights here, and even the guards seldom came this way.

Tumbled heaps of broken tiles and stones stood more than knee-high in the street that Dustfinger chose. They slipped

beneath his feet as he clambered over them, and when he listened to the nocturnal sounds again, afraid the noise might have attracted someone's attention, he saw a guard appear among the ruined houses. His mouth was dry with terror as he ducked behind the nearest wall. Swallows' nests clung to it, one above another. The guard was humming as he came closer. Dustfinger knew him; he had been with Capricorn for many years. Basta had recruited him from a village in another country. For Capricorn had not always lived among these hills. There had been other places, remote villages like this one, houses, abandoned farms, even a fortified castle once. But a day had always come when the web of fear so expertly spun by Capricorn tore, and the attention of the police was drawn to his men and what they were up to. Eventually the same thing would happen here.

The guard stood still to light a cigarette. Its smoke drifted to Dustfinger's nostrils. Turning his head, he saw a thin white cat perched among the stones. It sat there perfectly still, its green eyes staring at him. 'Sssh!' he wanted to whisper. 'Do I look dangerous? No, but that man there will shoot first you, then me.' The green eyes went on staring. The white tail began twitching back and forth. Dustfinger looked at his dusty boots, at a twisted iron bar lying among the stones, anywhere but at the cat. Animals don't like you to look them in the eye. Gwin bared his sharp teeth whenever Dustfinger looked straight at him.

The guard began humming again, the cigarette between his lips. At last, just as Dustfinger was beginning to feel he would be crouching behind this ruined wall for the rest of his life, the guard turned and strolled off. Dustfinger dared not move until the sound of his footsteps had died away. When he straightened up, feeling stiff, the cat raced away, spitting, and he stood there for a long time among the empty houses, waiting for his heartbeat to slow.

No other guard crossed his path, and soon he was vaulting over Capricorn's wall. The scent of thyme greeted him, a heavy scent that usually filled the air only by day. But everything seemed to be aromatic this hot night, even the tomato plants and lettuces. Poisonous plants grew in the bed just outside the house. These the Magpie tended herself. Many a dead body in the village had smelled of oleander or henbane.

The window of the room where Resa slept was open, as usual. When Dustfinger imitated Gwin's angry chattering a hand waved from the open window, and then quickly disappeared. He leaned against the grating over the door and waited. The sky above him was sprinkled with so many stars there hardly seemed to be any space left for the darkness. She's sure to have found out something, he thought, but suppose she tells me Capricorn has locked the book in one of his safes?

The door behind the grating opened. It always squealed, as if complaining of being disturbed at night. Dustfinger turned, and looked into a strange girl's face. She was young, perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old, her cheeks still chubby like a child's.

'Where's Resa?' Dustfinger clutched the grating. 'What's happened to her?'

The girl seemed to be transfixed by terror. She was staring at him as if she had never seen a scarred face before.

'Did she send you down here?' Dustfinger wished he could put his hands through the grating and shake this silly little goose. 'Tell me! I don't have all night.' He ought not to have asked Resa to help him. He ought to have gone searching for the book himself. How could he have endangered her? 'Have they shut her up somewhere? Tell me!'

The girl looked at something over his shoulders, and took a step back. Dustfinger spun round, to see whatever she had seen – and found himself looking into Basta's face.

Dustfinger's mind raced. Why hadn't he heard anything? Basta was notorious for his silent tread, but Flatnose, who was

with him, was no master of the art of stalking. And Basta had brought someone else too: Mortola was standing beside him. So it wasn't just fresh air that she had been enjoying last night. Or had Resa betrayed him to her? The idea hurt.

'I really didn't expect you to venture here again,' purred Basta, pushing him against the grating with the flat of his hand. Dustfinger felt the iron bars pressing into his back.

Flatnose was grinning as broadly as a child at Christmas. He always grinned like that when he was allowed to put the fear of death into someone.

'And what have you to do with the lovely Resa?' Basta snapped his knife open, and Flatnose's smile widened as fear brought out beads of sweat on Dustfinger's forehead. 'I always said so!' continued Basta as he slowly brought the tip of the knife closer to Dustfinger's chest. 'The fire-eater's in love with Resa, I said, he'd devour her with his eyes if he could, but the others wouldn't believe me. All the same – to think of a lily-livered coward like you venturing here!'

'Ah, but he's in love,' said Flatnose, laughing.

But Basta merely shook his head. 'No, our dirty-fingered friend wouldn't have come here for love, he's far too cold a fish. He's here for the book. Am I right? You're still homesick for those fluttering fairies and stinking trolls.' Almost tenderly, Basta ran the knife across Dustfinger's throat.

Dustfinger forgot how to breathe. The trick of it seemed to have escaped him.

'Back to your room!' the Magpie snapped at the girl behind him. 'Why are you still standing around?'

Dustfinger heard the rustle of a dress, and a door closed abruptly.

Basta's knife was still at his throat, but just as he was about to let the tip of it wander a little higher the Magpie seized his

arm. 'That's enough!' she commanded. 'You can stop your little game now, Basta.'

'That's right, the boss said we were to bring him in uninjured.' Flatnose's voice made it clear how little he thought of this order.

Basta let the knife wander over Dustfinger's throat one last time. Then, with a swift movement, he snapped it shut again.

'What a shame!' said Basta.

Dustfinger felt the man's breath on his own skin. Basta's breath smelled of mint, fresh and sharp. Apparently a girl he'd once wanted to kiss had told him he had bad breath. The girl had regretted it, but ever since then Basta chewed peppermint leaves from morning to night. 'You've always given good sport, Dustfinger,' he said as he stepped back, still holding the closed flick-knife.

'Take him to the church!' Mortola ordered. 'I'll go and tell Capricorn.'

'Did you know the boss is very angry with your mute girlfriend?' whispered Flatnose to Dustfinger as he and Basta dragged him between them. 'She was always quite a favourite of his.'

For a split second Dustfinger felt almost happy.

So Resa hadn't given him away.

All the same, he never ought to have asked her for help. Never.



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38

A Quiet Voice

She liked his tears so much that she put out her beautiful finger and let them run over it.

Her voice was so low that at first he could not make out what she said. Then he made it out. She was saying that she thought she could get well again if children believed in fairies.

J.M. Barrie,
Peter Pan

Meggie did try her plan. As soon as it was dark she hammered on the door with her fist. Fenoglio woke with a start, but before he could stop her Meggie had called to the guard outside the door that she had to go to the loo. The man who had relieved Flatnose was a short-legged fellow with jug ears, who was amusing himself by swatting moths with a rolled-up newspaper. Over a dozen insects were already smeared on the white wall when he let Meggie out into the corridor.

‘I need to go too!’ cried Fenoglio, perhaps intending to dissuade Meggie from carrying out her plan, but the guard closed the door in his face. ‘One at a time!’ he grunted at the old man. ‘And if you can’t wait, you’ll just have to pee out of the window.’

Taking his newspaper with him as he escorted Meggie to the lavatory, he killed three more moths and a butterfly that was fluttering helplessly from wall to bare wall. Finally, he pushed a

door open, the last door before the staircase to the ground floor. Just a few more steps, thought Meggie. I'm sure I can run downstairs faster than he can.

'Please, Meggie, you must forget about running away!' Fenoglio had kept whispering in her ear. 'You'll get lost. There's nothing outside but wild country for miles! Your father would be furious if he knew what you were planning.'

Oh no, he wouldn't, Meggie had thought. But when she was in the little room which contained nothing but a lavatory and a bucket her courage almost failed her. It was so dark outside, so terribly dark. And it was still a long way to the door of Capricorn's house.

I must try, she whispered to herself before she opened the door. I must, I must!

The guard caught up with her on the fifth stair. He carried her back over his shoulder, like a sack of potatoes. 'And next time I'll take you to the boss!' he said before pushing her back into the room. 'He'll think up a good punishment for you.'

She cried for almost half an hour, while Fenoglio sat beside her staring unhappily into space. 'It's all right,' he kept murmuring, but nothing was all right, nothing at all.

'We don't even have a light in here,' she finally sobbed. 'And they've taken my books away.'

At that Fenoglio reached under his pillow and put a torch on her lap. 'I found it under my mattress,' he whispered. 'With a few books too. Who would have thought someone had hidden them there?'

Darius, the reader. Meggie could remember how the thin little man had come hurrying up the nave of Capricorn's church with his pile of books. The torch must surely be his. How long had Capricorn kept him prisoner in this bare little room?

'There was a blanket in the cupboard as well,' whispered Fenoglio. 'I put it on the top bunk for you. Can't get up there

myself, I'm afraid – when I tried the whole thing swayed like a ship at sea.'

'I'd rather sleep in the top bunk anyway,' murmured Meggie, rubbing her sleeve over her face. She didn't want to cry any more. It was no good anyway.

Fenoglio had put some of Darius's books on the bunk along with the blanket for her. Meggie carefully laid them out side by side. They were almost all books for grown-ups: a well-worn thriller, a book about snakes, another about Alexander the Great, the *Odyssey*. The only books for children were a collection of fairy tales and *Peter Pan* – and she had read *Peter Pan* at least half a dozen times already.

Outside, the guard struck out with his newspaper again, and below her Fenoglio tossed and turned restlessly on the narrow bunk. Meggie knew she wouldn't be able to sleep, so there was no point even trying. Once again she looked at the strange books. Closed doors, all of them. Which should she open? Behind which of them would she forget all of this, Basta and Capricorn, *Inkheart*, herself, everything? She put aside the thriller and the book about Alexander the Great, hesitated – and picked up the *Odyssey*. It was a worn little volume; Darius must have liked it very much. He had even underlined some passages, one of them so hard that his pencil had almost gone through the paper: *But hard as he tried, he could not save his friends*. Undecidedly, Meggie leafed through the worn pages, then closed the book and put it down. No. She knew the story well enough to realise that she was almost as afraid of the Greek heroes as she was of Capricorn's men. She wiped a lingering tear away from her cheek, and let her hand hover over the other books. Fairy tales. She wasn't particularly fond of fairy tales, but the book looked attractive. The pages rustled as Meggie browsed through them. They were thin as tracing paper and covered with tiny print. There were wonderful illustrations of dwarves and fairies, and the stories told tales of mighty beings tall as giants, strong as bears, even immortal, but they

were all malignant: the giants ate human beings, the dwarves were greedy for gold, the fairies were malicious and bore a grudge. No. Meggie turned the torch on the last book. *Peter Pan*.

The fairy in that book wasn't very nice either, but at least Meggie knew the world awaiting her between its covers very well. Perhaps it was just the thing for such a dark night. An owl screeched outside, but otherwise all was still in Capricorn's village. Fenoglio murmured something in his sleep and began to snore. Meggie snuggled down under the scratchy blanket, took Mo's sweater out of her rucksack and put it under her head.

'Please,' she whispered as she opened the book, 'please get me out of here just for an hour or so, please take me far, far away.' Outside, the guard muttered something to himself. He was probably bored to death. The floorboards creaked under his tread as he paced up and down outside the locked door.

'Take me away from here,' whispered Meggie, 'please take me away from here.'

She let her finger run along the lines, over the rough, sandy paper, while her eyes followed the letters to another, colder place, in another time, to a house without locked doors and black-jacketed thugs. *A moment after the fairy's entrance the window was blown open*, whispered Meggie, hearing the sound of the window creaking as it opened, *blown open by the breathing of the little stars, and Peter dropped in. He had carried Tinker Bell part of the way, and his hand was still messy with the fairy dust.* Fairies, thought Meggie. I can see why Dustfinger misses the fairies. No, that was not allowed. She mustn't think of Dustfinger, only of Tinker Bell and Peter Pan, and Wendy lying in her bed, knowing nothing yet of the strange boy who had flown into her room dressed in leaves and cobwebs. *'Tinker Bell,' he called softly, after making sure that the children were asleep. 'Tink, where are you?' She was in a jug for the moment, and liking it extremely; she had never been in a jug before.* Tinker Bell. Meggie whispered the name twice; she had always liked the sound of it, you clicked your tongue against your teeth, and

then there was the soft B sound slipping out of your lips like a kiss. *'Oh, do come out of that jug, and tell me, do you know where they put my shadow?'* The loveliest tinkle as of golden bells answered him. *It is the fairy language. You ordinary children can never hear it, but if you were to hear it you would know that you had heard it once before.* If I could fly like Tinker Bell, thought Meggie, I could simply climb out on the windowsill and fly away. I wouldn't have to worry about the snakes, and I'd find Mo before he gets here. He must have lost the way. Yes, that must be it. But suppose something had happened to him ... Meggie shook her head as if to drive away the bad thoughts that had wormed their way into her mind yet again. *Tink said that the shadow was in the big box, she whispered. She meant the chest of drawers, and Peter jumped at the drawers, scattering their contents to the ground with both hands ...*

Meggie stopped. There was something bright in the room. She switched the torch off, but the light was still there, *a thousand times brighter than the night-lights ... and when it came to rest for a second, whispered Meggie, you saw it was a ...* She did not speak the word aloud. She just followed the light with her eyes as it flew round the room, very fast, faster than a glow-worm and much larger.

'Fenoglio!' She couldn't hear any sound from the guard outside the door. Perhaps he'd gone to sleep. Meggie leaned over the side of the bunk until she could touch Fenoglio's shoulder. 'Fenoglio, look!' She shook him until he finally opened his eyes. Suppose the little creature flew out of the window?

Meggie slid down from the top bunk, and shut the window so quickly that she almost caught one of the shimmering wings in it. The fairy, alarmed, whirred away. Meggie thought she heard an indignant chirrup.

Fenoglio stared at the shining little creature, his eyes heavy with sleep. 'What is it?' he asked hoarsely. 'A mutated glow-worm?'

Meggie went back to the bed without taking her eyes off the fairy, who was darting faster and faster round the little room like a lost butterfly, up to the ceiling, back to the door, over to the window again. She kept returning to the window. Meggie put the book on Fenoglio's lap.

'*Peter Pan.*' He looked at the book, then at the fairy, then at the book again.

'I didn't mean to do it!' whispered Meggie. 'Really I didn't.'

The fairy kept colliding with the window again and again.

'No!' Meggie hurried over to her. 'You mustn't go out! You don't understand.' *It was a fairy, no longer than your hand, but still growing. It was a girl called Tinker Bell, exquisitely gowned in a skeleton leaf.*

'Someone's coming!' Fenoglio sat up in such a hurry that he hit his head on the top bunk. He was right. Out in the corridor footsteps were approaching, rapid, firm footsteps. Meggie retreated to the window. What did it mean? It was the middle of the night. Perhaps Mo's arrived, she thought, Mo is here. Although she didn't want to feel glad of it, her heart leaped with joy.

'Hide her!' whispered Fenoglio. 'Quick, hide her!'

Meggie looked at him, confused. Of course. The fairy. They mustn't find her. Meggie tried to catch Tinker Bell, but the fairy slipped through her fingers and whirled up to the ceiling, where she hovered like a light made of invisible glass.

The footsteps were very close now. 'Call that keeping watch?' It was Basta's voice. Meggie heard a hollow groan; he had probably woken the guard with a kick. 'Unlock that door, and get a move on. I don't have forever.'

Someone put a key in the lock. 'That's the wrong one, you dozy idiot! Capricorn wants to see the girl, and I shall tell him why he's had to wait so long.'

Meggie climbed up on her bed. The bunk swayed alarmingly as she stood on it. ‘Tinker Bell!’ she whispered. ‘Please! Come here!’ But as she reached out her hand, the fairy flew back to the window – and Basta opened the door.

‘Hey, where did that come from?’ he asked, standing in the doorway. ‘It’s years since I saw one of those fluttery things.’

Meggie and Fenoglio said nothing – what was there to say?

‘You needn’t think you can wriggle out of telling me!’ Basta took off his jacket and went slowly over to the window, holding it in his left hand. ‘You stand in the doorway in case it gets away from me!’ he told the guard. ‘And if you let it get past you I shall slice off your ears.’

‘Leave her alone!’ Meggie slid hastily down from the bed again, but Basta moved faster. He threw his jacket. Tinker Bell’s light disappeared, snuffed out like a candle. There was a faint twitching under the jacket as it fell to the floor. Basta picked it up carefully, holding it together like a sack, went over to Meggie and stopped in front of her. ‘Well, sweetheart, let’s hear your story,’ he said in a menacingly quiet voice. ‘Where did that fairy come from?’

‘I don’t know!’ uttered Meggie without looking at him. ‘She – she was just suddenly here.’

Basta looked at the guard. ‘Ever seen anything like a fairy in these parts?’ he asked.

The guard raised the newspaper, to which a couple of dusty moth wings were still clinging, and slapped the door frame with it, smiling broadly. ‘No, but if I did I’d know what to do about it!’ he said.

‘You’re right, those little creatures are as troublesome as midges. But they’re supposed to bring luck.’ Basta turned back to Meggie. ‘Now then, out with it! Where did she come from? I’m not asking you again.’

Meggie couldn't help it: her eyes strayed to the book that Fenoglio had dropped. Basta followed her glance, and picked it up.

'Well, fancy that!' he murmured as he looked at the picture on the cover. The artist had produced a good likeness of Tinker Bell. In real life she was a little paler and a little smaller than the picture suggested, but of course Basta still recognised her. He whistled softly through his teeth, then held the book close to Meggie's face. 'Don't try telling me the old man read her out of this!' he said. 'You did it. I'll bet my knife you did it. Did your father teach you how, or have you just inherited the knack from him? Well, it comes to the same thing.' He stuck the book in his waistband and grasped Meggie's arm. 'Come along, we're going to tell Capricorn about this. I was really supposed to fetch you just to meet an old acquaintance, but I'm sure Capricorn will have no objection to hearing such interesting news.'

'Has my father come?' Meggie did not resist as he forced her out of the door.

Basta shook his head and looked ironically at her. 'Him? No, he hasn't turned up yet,' he said. 'Obviously he thinks more of his own skin than yours. I wouldn't be best pleased with him if I were you.'

Meggie felt two emotions at once – disappointment as sharp as a prickle, and relief.

'I'll admit I'm rather disappointed in him,' Basta continued. 'I swore he'd come looking for you, but I guess we don't need him any more. Right?' He shook his jacket, and Meggie thought she heard a quiet, desperate tinkling.

'Lock the old man in,' Basta told the guard. 'And if you're snoring again when I get back it will be the worse for you!'

Then he hauled Meggie down the corridor.

39

The Punishment for Traitors

‘What about you?’ enquired Lobosch. ‘You’re not afraid, are you, Krabat?’

‘More than you guess,’ said Krabat. ‘And not for myself alone.’

Otfried Preussler,
The Satanic Mill

Meggie’s shadow followed her like an evil spirit as she and Basta crossed the square outside the church. The glaring floodlights made the moon look faded.

It was not so bright inside the church. Capricorn’s statue, looking down on them in the gloom, was pale and half swallowed up by the shadows. Between the columns it was as dark as if night had fled there to escape the floodlights. Only the place where Capricorn sat, leaning back in his armchair with a contemptuous expression and wrapped in a silk dressing gown that shimmered like peacock feathers, was illuminated by a single lamp. The Magpie stood behind him, appearing little more than a washed-out face above a black dress in the dim light. A fire was burning in one of the braziers at the foot of the steps. The smoke stung Meggie’s eyes, and the flickering firelight danced on the red walls and columns as if the whole church were ablaze.

‘Hang the rags outside his children’s window as a final warning.’ Capricorn’s voice echoed in Meggie’s ears, although

he kept it lowered. 'And soak them with petrol until it's seeping out,' he told Cockerell, who was standing at the foot of the steps with two other men. 'When that smell reaches the fool's nostrils first thing in the morning, perhaps he'll finally realise that my patience is at an end.'

Cockerell received the order with a brief nod, turned on his heel and signalled to the other two to follow him. Their faces were blackened with soot, and each of the three wore a red rooster's feather in his buttonhole. 'Ah, Silvertongue's daughter!' growled Cockerell sarcastically as he limped past Meggie. 'Well, well, hasn't your father come for you yet? Doesn't seem very keen to see you, does he?' The other two laughed, and Meggie couldn't help the hot blood rising to her face.

'At last!' cried Capricorn, as Basta stopped at the foot of the steps with his prisoner. 'What kept you so long?' Something like a smile passed over the Magpie's face. She had pushed her lower lip out slightly, which gave her thin face a look of great satisfaction. It troubled Meggie much more than Capricorn's mother's usual dark looks.

'The guard couldn't find the right key,' replied Basta irritably. 'And then – well, I had to catch something.' The fairy began moving again as he held up his jacket, and its fabric bulged with her frenzied attempts to struggle free.

'What's that?' Capricorn's voice sounded impatient. 'Have you taken to catching bats these days?'

Basta's lips quivered with annoyance, but he bit back his reply and, without a word, put his hand under the black cloth. Suppressing a curse, he produced the fairy. 'Devil take these flickery little things!' he said angrily. 'I'd quite forgotten how hard they can bite!'

One of Tinker Bell's wings was fluttering frantically, the other was held between Basta's fingers. Meggie couldn't watch. She

was terribly ashamed of herself for luring this fragile little creature out of her book.

Capricorn looked at the fairy with an expression of distaste. 'Where did that come from? And what kind is it? I never saw one with wings like that before.'

Basta took *Peter Pan* out of his waistband and put the book down on the steps. 'I think it comes out of here,' he said. 'Look at the picture on the cover. There are more pictures of her inside. And guess who read her out of it.' He squeezed Tinker Bell so hard that she gulped silently for air, while he laid his other hand on Meggie's shoulder. She tried to shake his fingers off, but Basta merely tightened his grip.

'The girl?' Capricorn sounded incredulous.

'Yes, and it seems as though she's as good at it as her father. Look at this fairy.' Basta grabbed Tinker Bell's slender legs and dangled her up in the air. 'Seems perfectly all right, doesn't she? She can fly and scold and make tinkling sounds, all the things those stupid fairies do.'

'Interesting. Yes, very interesting indeed.' Capricorn rose from his chair, tightened the belt of his dressing gown and came down the steps. He stopped beside the book that Basta had put down on them. 'So it runs in the family!' he murmured as he bent to pick it up. Frowning, he looked at the cover. '*Peter Pan*,' he read. 'Why, that's one of the books my old reader Darius particularly liked. Yes, now I remember. He once read to me from it. The idea was to lure out one of those pirates, but he failed miserably. He fetched a load of stinking fish and a rusty grappling iron into my bedroom instead. Didn't we punish him by making him eat the fish?'

Basta laughed. 'Yes, but he was even more upset that you had his books taken away. He must have hidden this one.'

'So he must.' Capricorn went over to Meggie, looking thoughtful. She would have liked to bite his fingers when he put his hand under her chin, turning her face so that she had to

look straight into his lifeless eyes. ‘See how she looks at me, Basta?’ he remarked mockingly. ‘Just as obstinate as her father always was. Better save that look for him, sweetheart. You’re very angry with your father, I’m sure. But I couldn’t care less where *he* is. Because from now on I have you, my new, my wonderfully talented reader – whereas you, well, you must hate him for abandoning you, right? Don’t be ashamed of it. Hatred can be very inspiring. I never liked my own father either.’

Meggie turned her head aside when Capricorn finally let go of her chin. Her face was burning with shame and fury, and she could still feel his fingers as if they had left marks on her skin.

‘Did Basta tell you why he was to bring you here so late at night?’

‘To meet someone.’ Meggie tried to make her voice sound bold and unafraid, but she didn’t succeed. The sobs in her throat would let only a whisper emerge.

‘That’s right!’ Capricorn gave the Magpie a signal. She came down the steps and disappeared into the dark beyond the columns. A little later there was a creaking sound above Meggie’s head, and when she looked up to the roof in alarm she saw something being lowered from the darkness: a net, no, two nets such as she had seen in fishing boats. They stopped and hung there about five metres above the floor, just over Meggie’s head, and only then did she see human figures caught in the coarse ropes – like birds entangled in the netting over a fruit tree. Meggie was feeling dizzy just from looking up. What must it be like to be dangling there, held only by a few cords?

‘Well, don’t you recognise your old friend?’ Capricorn put his hands in his dressing-gown pockets. Tinker Bell was still held in Basta’s fingers like a broken doll. Her faint tinkling was the only sound to be heard. ‘Yes, I see you do!’ There was no mistaking the satisfaction in Capricorn’s voice. ‘That’s what happens to filthy little traitors who steal keys and set prisoners free.’

Meggie refused to look at Capricorn. She had eyes only for Dustfinger.

‘Hello, Meggie! You look rather pale!’ he called down. He was trying very hard to sound light-hearted, but Meggie heard the terror in his voice. She knew what voices meant. ‘I’m to give you love from your father! He’ll come for you soon, he says, and he won’t come alone.’

‘You’ll make a teller of fairy tales yet if you carry on like that, fire-eater!’ Basta called up. ‘But even the girl here doesn’t believe that tale. You’ll have to think up something better!’

Meggie stared up at Dustfinger. She so wanted to believe him.

‘Basta, let go of that poor fairy!’ he called to his old enemy. ‘Send her up to me. It’s far too long since I saw one of those.’

‘Oh, I bet you’d like that. No, I’m keeping her for myself!’ replied Basta, flicking Tinker Bell’s tiny nose with his finger. ‘I’ve heard that fairies keep bad luck away if you keep them in your house. I’ll put her in one of those big glass wine jugs. You were always so keen on fairies – what do they eat? Do I feed her flies, or what?’

Tinker Bell braced her arms against his fingers and tried desperately to free her second wing. She managed it too, but Basta had a strong grip on her legs, and hard as she fluttered she couldn’t break free. At last, with a quiet tinkle, she gave up. Her light was hardly any brighter now than a candle flickering out.

‘Do you know why I had the girl brought here, Dustfinger?’ Capricorn called up to his prisoner. ‘She was to persuade you to tell us something about her father and where he is – if you really know anything, which I begin to doubt. But now I don’t need the information any more. The daughter can take her father’s place, and just at the right time too! For I’ve decided that we must think up something really special for your punishment. Something impressive, something memorable! After all, that’s only right for a traitor, isn’t it? Can you guess

what my idea is? No? Then let me give you a clue. In your honour, my new reader will read aloud to us from *Inkheart*. It's your favourite book, after all, even though I know you're not very fond of the character I want her to bring out of it. Her father would have fetched that old friend for me long ago if you hadn't helped him to escape, but now his daughter will do it. Can you guess who it is I mean?'

Dustfinger laid his scarred cheek against the net. 'Oh yes, indeed I can. How could I ever forget him?' he said, so quietly that Meggie could hardly make out the words.

'Why are you talking only about the fire-eater's punishment?' The Magpie had appeared between the columns again. 'Have you forgotten our little mute pigeon Resa? Her treachery was at least as bad as his.' She looked up at the second net with a disdainful expression.

'Yes, to be sure!' There was something almost like regret in Capricorn's voice. 'Ah, what a waste – but there's nothing else for it.'

Meggie couldn't see the face of the woman dangling in the second net just beyond Dustfinger. She saw only the dark blonde hair, a blue dress, and slender hands clinging to the ropes.

Capricorn sighed heavily. 'It really is a shame,' he said, turning to Dustfinger. 'Why did you have to pick on her, of all people? Couldn't you have persuaded one of the others to go nosing around for you? I really have had a weakness for her, ever since that useless Darius read her out of the book for me. It never bothered me that she lost her voice in the process. No, far from it, I stupidly assumed that meant I could trust her more. Did you know her hair used to look like spun gold?'

'Yes, I remember that,' said Dustfinger hoarsely. 'But in your presence it's turned darker.'

'Nonsense!' Capricorn frowned with annoyance. 'Maybe we should try fairy dust. Sprinkled with a little fairy dust, they say,

even brass will look like gold. Perhaps it works on a woman's hair as well.'

'Hardly worth the trouble!' said the Magpie mockingly. 'Unless you want her to look particularly beautiful for her execution.'

'Oh, never mind.' Capricorn turned abruptly and went back to the steps. Meggie hardly noticed. She was looking up at the strange woman. Capricorn's words were working away feverishly in her mind: hair like spun gold ... that useless reader Darius ... no, it couldn't be true. She stared up, narrowing her eyes to see the face better through the ropes, but it was hidden in dark shadows.

'Good.' Capricorn dropped into his chair again with another heavy sigh. 'How long shall we need for the preparations? It all ought to be done properly, I think.'

'Two days.' The Magpie climbed the steps and took up her position behind him. 'If you want to summon the men from the other bases, that is.'

Capricorn frowned. 'Yes, why not? It's time to set everyone a little example. Discipline has left much to be desired recently.' He looked at Basta as he said this, and Basta bowed his head as if all the misdemeanours of the last few days weighed heavily on him. 'The day after tomorrow, then,' Capricorn went on. 'When darkness falls. I want Darius to carry out another experiment with the girl first. Get her to read something out of a book, anything – I just want to make sure that fairy didn't turn up by pure chance.'

Basta had wrapped Tinker Bell in his jacket again. Meggie wanted to put her hands over her ears so as not to hear the feeble tinkling sounds the fairy was making. She pressed her lips together to stop them trembling, and looked up at Capricorn.

'But I won't read aloud for you!' she said. Her voice rang out through the church at twice its usual volume. 'Not a word! I

won't read you out any treasure, and I certainly won't read out some kind of – of executioner!' She spat the word into Capricorn's face.

But Capricorn only toyed with the belt of his dressing gown, looking bored. 'Take her away,' he told Basta. 'It's late. The child must get some sleep.'

Basta prodded Meggie in the back. 'You heard. Go on, get moving.'

Meggie looked up at Dustfinger one last time, and then walked uncertainly down the nave ahead of Basta. When she had passed below the second net she looked up again. The unknown woman's face was still hidden, but she thought she could make out her eyes, and a slender nose ... and if she imagined the hair rather lighter in colour—

'Go on, I said!' snapped Basta.

Meggie obeyed, but she kept looking back. 'I won't do it!' she cried when she had almost reached the church porch. 'I swear! I won't read *anyone* here. Ever!'

'Oh, don't swear oaths you can't keep!' whispered Basta as he pushed the door open and led her out into the brightly floodlit square.



The Black Horse of the Night

He bent down and lifted Sophie from his pocket ... She was still in her nightie and her feet were bare. She shivered and stared around her at the swirling mists and ghostly vapours.

‘Where are we?’ she asked.

‘We is in Dream Country,’ the BFG said. ‘This is where all dreams is beginning.’

Roald Dahl,
The BFG

Fenoglio was lying on his bed when Basta pushed Meggie in through the door.

‘What have you done to her?’ he demanded of Basta, swiftly getting to his feet. ‘She’s white as a sheet!’

But Basta had already closed the door behind him. ‘You’ll be relieved in two hours,’ Meggie heard him tell the guard. Then he was gone.

Fenoglio put his hands on Meggie’s shoulders and looked into her face with concern. ‘Come on, tell me. What did they want you for? Is your father here?’

Meggie shook her head. ‘They’ve caught Dustfinger,’ she said. ‘And a woman.’

‘What woman? Heavens, what a state you’re in!’ Fenoglio drew her over to the bed, and Meggie sat down beside him.

‘I think she’s my mother,’ she whispered.

‘Your mother?’ Fenoglio looked at her in astonishment. His eyes were bloodshot from his sleepless night.

Distractedly, Meggie smoothed down her skirt. It was dirty and crumpled. No wonder, she’d been sleeping in it for days. ‘Her hair’s darker now,’ she stammered, ‘and of course Mo’s photo of her is nine years old ... Capricorn has her in a net, and Dustfinger too. He’s going to have them both executed in two days’ time, and I’m supposed to read someone out of *Inkheart* to do it – that friend, as Capricorn calls him. I told you. Mo was supposed to be going to do it. You wouldn’t tell me who the friend was, but now you *must!*’ She looked pleadingly at Fenoglio.

The old man closed his eyes. ‘Merciful heaven!’ he murmured.

Outside, it was still dark. The moon hung in the sky in front of their window, with a cloud drifting past it like a tattered dress.

‘I’ll tell you tomorrow,’ said Fenoglio. ‘That’s a promise.’

‘No! Tell me now.’

He looked at her thoughtfully. ‘It’s not a story for this hour of the night. You’ll have bad dreams afterwards.’

‘Tell me!’ Meggie repeated.

Fenoglio sighed. ‘Oh dear. I know that look from my grandchildren,’ he said. ‘Very well, then.’ He helped her up to her bunk, put Mo’s sweater under her head and pulled the blanket up to her chin. ‘I’ll tell it to you the way I wrote it in *Inkheart*,’ he said quietly. ‘I know that passage almost by heart. I was very proud of it at the time.’ He cleared his throat before he began, whispering the words into the night. ‘*But one being was feared even more than Capricorn’s men. He was known as the Shadow, and he appeared only when Capricorn called him. Sometimes he was red as fire, sometimes as grey as the ashes into*

which fire turns all that it devours. He leaped from the ground like flame flickering up from wood. His touch and even his breath brought death. He rose up at his master's feet, soundless and faceless, scenting the air like a dog on the trail, waiting to be shown his victim.' Fenoglio swept a hand over his forehead and looked at the window. It was some time before he went on, as if he were recalling the words to mind from long ago. *'They say,'* he continued at last, *'that Capricorn had the Shadow made from his victims' ashes by a troll, or by the dwarves who know all that fire and smoke can do. No one was certain, for it was said that Capricorn had those who had brought the Shadow to life killed afterwards. But everyone knew one thing: the Shadow was immortal and invulnerable, and as pitiless as his master.'*

Fenoglio fell silent. And Meggie, her heart beating fast, gazed out at the night.

'Yes, Meggie,' Fenoglio said at last in a low voice. 'I think Capricorn wants you to fetch him the Shadow. And God have mercy on us if you succeed. There are many monsters in this world, most of them human and all of them mortal. I would not like to have an immortal monster on my conscience, a monster spreading fear and terror here for all time. Your father had an idea when he came to see me – I've already mentioned it to you, and it may be our only chance, but I just don't know how it will work yet. I must think hard. We don't have much time, and you ought to get some sleep now. When did you say this is to happen – the day after tomorrow?'

Meggie nodded. 'As soon as dusk falls,' she whispered.

Fenoglio passed a weary hand over his face. 'Don't worry about the woman,' he said. 'You may not want to hear this, but I don't think she can possibly be your mother, much as you may wish she were. How could she have come here?'

'It was Darius!' Meggie buried her face in Mo's sweater. 'The stupid man who can't read aloud well enough. Capricorn said so: he read her back out of *Inkheart* and she lost her voice

coming out of the book. She's back, I'm sure she is, and Mo doesn't know! He thinks she's still stuck in the story.'

'Well, if you're right, then I wish she really were still there,' muttered Fenoglio, pulling the blanket up over her shoulders again with a sigh. 'I still think you're wrong, but believe what you like! And now go to sleep.'

But of course Meggie couldn't sleep. She lay there with her face to the wall, listening to her own heart. Fear and joy mingled there like two colours running into each other. Whenever she closed her eyes she saw the nets and the two faces there among the cords, Dustfinger's and the other face, blurred as an old photograph. Hard as she tried to see it more clearly, it always faded again.

Dawn was breaking outside by the time she finally fell asleep, but the nightmares hadn't finished with her yet. They grew especially fast in the grey time between night and day, spinning an eternity out of seconds. One-eyed ogres and giant spiders stole into Meggie's sleep, hounds of hell, witches who ate children, all the bugbears she had ever met in stories. They crept out of the box that Mo had made her and jumped from the pages of her favourite books. Even the monsters came out of the picture books that Mo had given her before she knew the alphabet. They danced through Meggie's dream, brightly coloured and shaggy, their wide mouths smiling, baring their pointed little teeth. There was the Cheshire Cat she had always been so afraid of, and here came the Wild Things that Mo liked so much he had hung a picture of them in his workshop. How huge their teeth were! Dustfinger would be crunched between those fangs like crispbread. But just as one of them was stretching out his claws, the one with eyes as big as saucers, a new figure came out of the grey void, hissing like a flame, ashen-grey and faceless, seized the Wild Thing and tore it into scraps of paper.

'Meggie!'

The monsters vanished, and the sun was shining on Meggie's face. Fenoglio was standing beside her bed. 'You were dreaming.'

Meggie sat up. The old man's face looked as if he hadn't closed his eyes all night and he had several new wrinkles. 'Where's my father, Fenoglio?' she asked. 'Oh, why doesn't he come?'



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Farid

Ali Baba ... was surprised to see a well-lighted and spacious chamber ... filled with all sorts of provisions, rich bales of silks, embroideries, and valuable tissues, piled upon one another, gold and silver ingots in great heaps, and money in bags. The sight of all these riches made him suppose that this cave must have been occupied for ages by robbers, who had succeeded one another.

‘The Story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’,
from **The Arabian Nights’ Entertainments**,
tr. Edward William Lane

Farid stared at the dark until his eyes hurt, but Dustfinger did not return. Sometimes Farid thought he saw his scarred face among the low-growing branches. Sometimes he thought he heard his almost silent footsteps on the dead leaves, but he was always wrong. Farid was used to listening to the sounds of the night. He had spent endless hours doing so back in his other life, when the world around him was not green but brown and yellow; his eyes had often let him down, but he had always been able to rely on his ears.

All the same, Farid listened in vain that night, the longest night of his life. Dustfinger didn’t come back. When day began to dawn above the hills Farid went to the two captives, gave

them water, a little of the dry bread they still had left, and a few olives.

‘Come on, Farid, untie us!’ said Silvertongue as Farid put the bread in his mouth. ‘Dustfinger should have been back by now, you know he should.’

Farid said nothing. He loved to hear Silvertongue’s voice. It had lured him out of his old, wretched life, but it seemed that Dustfinger didn’t like it any more, he didn’t know why – and Dustfinger had told him to keep watch on the prisoners. He had said nothing about untying them.

‘Look, you’re a clever lad,’ said the woman, ‘so use your head for a moment, will you? Are you going to sit here until Capricorn’s men come and find us? What a sight we’ll be: a boy watching two captives who can’t lift a finger to help him. They’ll fall about laughing.’

What was she called again? Eli-nor. Farid had difficulty remembering the name. It was awkward as a pebble on his tongue, and sounded like the name of an enchantress from a far-distant land. He thought her unnatural; she looked at him as a man might look, without timidity or fear, and her voice could be very loud and as angry as a lion’s roar.

‘We have to get down to the village, Farid!’ said Silvertongue. ‘We must find out what’s happened to Dustfinger – and where my daughter is.’

Yes, the girl – the girl with the clear, bright eyes, little pieces of sky fallen to the earth and caught in her dark lashes. Farid poked the ground with a stick. An ant was carrying a breadcrumb bigger than itself past his toes.

‘Perhaps he doesn’t understand what we’re saying,’ said Elinor.

Farid raised his head and cast her a glance of annoyance. ‘Yes, I do. I understand everything.’ And so he had, from the first moment, as if he had never heard any other language. He remembered the red church. Dustfinger had explained that it

was a church, although Farid had never seen such a building before. He also remembered the man with the knife. There had been a great many such men in his old life. They loved their knives and did terrible things with them.

‘You’ll run off if I untie you.’ Farid looked uncertainly at Silvertongue.

‘No, I won’t. Do you think I’d leave my daughter down there with Basta and Capricorn?’

Basta and Capricorn. Yes, those had been the names. The knife-man and the man with the eyes as colourless as water. A robber, a murderer ... Farid knew all about him. Dustfinger had told him a great deal as they sat together by the fire in the evening. They had exchanged sad stories, although both of them longed for one with a happy ending.

Now this story, too, was growing darker with each day that passed.

‘It’ll be better if I go alone.’ Farid dug the stick so hard into the ground that it broke in his fingers. ‘I’m used to slinking into strange villages, strange palaces and houses – it was my job in the old days. If you know what I mean.’

Silvertongue nodded.

‘They always sent me,’ Farid went on. ‘Who’d be afraid of a thin young boy? I could sniff around everywhere without arousing suspicion. When did the guards change? Which was the best way of escape? Where did the richest man in the village live? If all went well they gave me enough to eat. If it did not they beat me like a dog.’

‘They?’ asked Elinor.

‘The thieves,’ replied Farid.

The two adults fell silent. And Dustfinger still wasn’t back. Farid looked towards the village and saw the first rays of the sun rising above its rooftops.

‘Very well. You may be right,’ said Silvertongue. ‘You go down alone and find out what we need to know, but first untie us. If you don’t we won’t be able to help you if they do catch you. And I don’t fancy sitting here tied up like this when the first snake wriggles past.’

The woman looked as frightened as if she already heard it rustling through the dead leaves. But Farid looked thoughtfully at Silvertongue’s face, trying to decide whether his eyes could trust him as his ears already did. Finally he stood up without a word, took the knife Dustfinger had given him from his belt, and cut them both free.

‘My God, I’m never letting anyone tie me up like that again!’ said Elinor, rubbing her arms and legs. ‘I feel as numb as a rag doll. How are you, Mortimer? Can you still feel your feet?’

Farid looked at her curiously. ‘You don’t look like his wife. Are you his mother?’ he asked, nodding in Silvertongue’s direction.

Elinor’s face came out in more red blotches than a toadstool. ‘Good Lord above, no! What makes you think that? Do I really look so old?’ Glancing down at herself, she sighed. ‘Yes, I probably do. All the same, I’m not his mother. I’m not Meggie’s mother either, in case that’s your next question. My children were all made of paper and printer’s ink, and that man,’ she said, pointing to the rooftops of Capricorn’s village shining through the trees, ‘that man down there destroyed a great many of them. Believe me, he’ll regret it.’

Farid looked at her doubtfully. He couldn’t imagine Capricorn being afraid of a woman, certainly not one who got out of breath when she climbed a hill and was scared of snakes. No, if the man with the pale eyes feared anything it would be what most people feared – death. And Elinor didn’t look as if she knew much about killing. Nor did Silvertongue.

‘The girl ...’ Farid hesitated before asking, ‘Where is her mother?’

Silvertongue went over to the cold fireplace and took a piece of the bread lying among the soot-blackened stones. 'She went away long ago,' he said. 'Meggie was just three. What about your own mother?'

Farid shrugged his shoulders and looked up at the sky. It was as blue as if the night had never been. 'I'd better go now,' he said, putting his knife away and picking up Dustfinger's rucksack. Gwin was sleeping close to it, curled up between the roots of a tree. Farid picked him up and put him in the rucksack. The marten sleepily protested, but Farid tickled his head and strapped the rucksack up.

'Why are you taking that marten?' asked Elinor in surprise. 'The smell of him could give you away.'

'He may come in useful,' replied Farid, pushing the tip of Gwin's bushy tail into the rucksack too. 'He's clever. Cleverer than a dog or a camel, anyway. He understands what you say to him, and maybe he'll find Dustfinger.'

'Farid.' Silvertongue was searching his pockets, and took out a piece of paper. 'I don't know whether you'll be able to find out where they're keeping Meggie prisoner,' he said, hastily scribbling something with the stump of a pencil, 'but if possible can you try to see she gets this note?'

Farid took the piece of paper and looked at it. 'What does it say?' he asked.

Elinor took the note from his hand. 'Heavens above, Mortimer, what's this?' she asked.

Silvertongue smiled. 'Meggie and I have often sent secret messages in this writing – she's much better at it than I am. Don't you recognise it? It comes from a book. *We're not far away*, it says. *Don't worry. We'll soon get you out. Mo, Elinor and Farid.* Meggie will be able to read the message, but no one else will.'

'Aha!' murmured Elinor, giving Farid the note back. 'Yes, if it falls into the wrong hands it's better that way. After all, perhaps

some of those fire-raisers can read.'

Farid folded the note until it was about the size of a coin, then put it in his trouser pocket. 'I'll be back when the sun is above those hills at the latest,' he said. 'Or if I'm not—'

'If you're not, I'll come and look for you,' Silvertongue ended the sentence.

'And so will I, of course,' added Elinor, looking fierce.

Farid did not think that was a good idea, but he didn't say so. He left, going the same way that Dustfinger had gone the night before, disappearing as if the ghosts who lurked in the darkness had eaten him alive.



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A Furry Face on the Windowsill

It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.

**Lewis Carroll,
*Through the Looking Glass***

Flatnose brought Meggie and Fenoglio their breakfast, and this morning it was more than bread and a few olives. He put a basket of fruit on the table for them, and a plate of small, sweet cakes. But Meggie didn't at all like the smile he served up at the same time.

'All for you, princess!' he grunted, pinching her cheek with his clumsy fingers. 'To strengthen your little voice. There's been a lot of excitement since Basta told us about the execution. Well, like I always said, there has to be more to life than hanging up a few dead roosters and shooting cats.'

Meggie exchanged a glance with Fenoglio. The old man was staring at Flatnose with an expression of disgust which suggested that he couldn't believe such a creature had slipped from his pen.

'Yes, to be sure, it's a terribly long time since we had a nice execution!' continued Flatnose, on his way back to the door. 'It'd attract too much attention, they always said. And when someone really had to disappear – well, the word was to go carefully! Make it look like an accident. Is that any fun? You bet it isn't. Not like it used to be, a good execution with eating

and drinking and dancing and music, that's the way to do it in style! And so we will this time – just like we did back in the good old days!'

Fenoglio took a sip of the black coffee that Flatnose had brought him, and choked.

'Don't you fancy that kind of thing, grandpa?' Flatnose looked at him sneeringly. 'Take my word for it, Capricorn's executions are something to remember!'

'Who do you think you're telling?' muttered Fenoglio unhappily.

At that moment someone knocked on the door. Flatnose had left it ajar, and Darius the reader put his head round it.

'Sorry!' he breathed, looking at Flatnose as anxiously as a bird obliged to get close to a hungry cat. 'I – er – I'm to get the girl to read something aloud. Capricorn's orders.'

'Really? Well, let's just hope she reads something useful out of a book this time. Basta showed me the fairy. She doesn't even sprinkle any fairy dust, however hard you shake her.' Flatnose looked at Meggie with a mixture of dislike and respect. Perhaps he thought she was some kind of a witch. 'Knock when you want to come out again,' he grunted, pushing past Darius.

Darius nodded and stood there for a moment before sitting down at the table with Meggie and Fenoglio, looking embarrassed. He stared greedily at the fruit until Fenoglio pushed the basket over to him. Tentatively, he took an apricot, and put it into his mouth as if he thought he would never in his life taste anything so delicious again.

'Good heavens, it's only an apricot!' laughed Fenoglio. 'Not exactly a rare fruit in these latitudes.'

Darius spat the apricot stone out into his hand, still looking awkward. 'Whenever they shut me up in this room,' he said timidly, 'they gave me nothing but dry bread. And they took my books away too, but I managed to hide some of them, and when

the hunger got too bad I looked at the pictures in them. The best was a picture of apricots. I sometimes sat for hours staring at the painted fruit with my mouth watering. Ever since then I just can't control myself when I see apricots.'

Meggie took another apricot from the basket and put it into his hand. 'Did they often shut you up?' she asked.

The thin little man shrugged. 'Yes, whenever I didn't read something out of a book properly,' he replied evasively. 'Well, that meant all the time, really. Then they finally gave up because they realised that my reading didn't exactly improve when they frightened me. On the contrary. Take Flatnose, for instance.' He lowered his voice, casting a nervous glance at the door. 'I read Flatnose out while Basta was standing beside me with his knife. Well ...' He raised his narrow shoulders regretfully.

Meggie looked at him sympathetically. Then she asked, hesitantly, 'Did you ever read any women out of that story?' Fenoglio looked at her uneasily.

'Certainly,' Darius replied. 'I read Mortola out of the book! She says I made her older, and rickety as a chair cobbled together badly, but I really don't think I got too much wrong with her. Luckily Capricorn agreed.'

'Any younger women?' Meggie was looking at neither Darius nor Fenoglio.

'Oh yes,' Darius sighed. 'On the same day as I read Mortola out. I remember it very well. Capricorn was living up in the north then, at a lonely, half-ruined farm in the mountains, and there weren't many local girls around. I myself was living not far away, in my sister's house. I worked as a teacher, but in my free time I read aloud now and then in libraries and schools, or for children's parties, and sometimes on warm summer evenings, I even read in a square or café. I loved reading aloud.'

His gaze wandered to the window, as if he could catch a glimpse there of those long-forgotten, happier days. 'I think

Basta noticed me when I was reading aloud at a party in the village – a passage from *Dr Dolittle* – and all of a sudden there was a bird flying around. I really didn't know I had the gift – perhaps it was something to do with Basta being there. Anyway, when I went home Basta caught me as if I were a stray dog and took me to Capricorn. First he made me read gold out of books, like your father did,' he said, smiling sadly at Meggie, 'but then I had to read Mortola out for him, and after that he told me to read his maidservants out too. It was terrible.' Darius pushed his glasses up on his nose with trembling fingers. 'I was so scared. How can you read aloud well when you're terrified? He made me try three times. Oh, I felt so sorry for them, I don't want to talk about it!' He buried his face in his hands, which were bony as an old man's. Meggie thought she heard him sob, and for a moment she hesitated to ask her next question, but then she did.

'The maid they call Resa,' she said, her heart beating in her mouth. 'Was she one of them?'

Darius took his hands away from his face. 'Yes, she came out quite by chance,' he said huskily. 'Capricorn had really wanted another of them, but suddenly there was Resa, and at first I thought I'd got it right for once. She looked so beautiful, almost improbably beautiful with her golden hair and her sad eyes. But then we realised she couldn't speak. Well, that didn't bother Capricorn, in fact I think he liked it.' He searched his trouser pocket and brought out a crumpled handkerchief. 'I really could read better once,' he said, sniffing. 'But this constant fear ... May I?' With a sad smile he took another apricot and bit into it. Then he wiped the juice from his mouth with his sleeve, cleared his throat, and gazed straight at Meggie. His eyes looked curiously large behind the thick lenses of his glasses.

'At the – er – festivities that Capricorn's planning,' he said, lowering his gaze and running his finger awkwardly along the edge of the table, 'the idea, as you probably know, is for you to read from *Inkheart*. The book's being kept in a secret place until

that time comes. Only Capricorn knows where it is. So you won't see it before the – er – occasion. Which means that we're to use another book for the latest test Capricorn wants of your talents. Luckily, there are a few other books in this village, not many, but anyway I've been told to choose something suitable.' He raised his head again and gave a small, slight smile. 'Fortunately I didn't have to look for gold and such treasures this time. All Capricorn wants is proof of your skill, and so,' he said, pushing a small book over the table, 'so I chose this one.'

Meggie bent over the cover. '*Collected Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen*,' she read aloud. She looked at Darius. 'They're beautiful stories.'

'Yes,' he breathed. 'Sad, but very, very beautiful.' Reaching over the table, he opened the book for Meggie at a place which he had marked with a couple of long blades of grass slipped between the yellowed pages. 'First I thought of my favourite story, the one about the nightingale. Maybe you know it?' Meggie nodded.

'But the fairy you read out of the book yesterday isn't happy in the jug where Basta has put her,' Darius went on, 'so I thought it might be better if you tried the tin soldier.'

The tin soldier. Meggie did not reply at once. The brave tin soldier in his little paper boat ... she imagined him suddenly appearing beside the fruit basket. 'No!' she said. 'No. I've told Capricorn already, I won't read anything out of a book for him, not even as a test. Tell him I can't do it any more. Just tell him I tried and nothing came out of the story!'

Darius gave her a sympathetic look. 'Oh, I would,' he said quietly. 'Really I would. But it's the Magpie—' he said, quietly putting his hand to his mouth as if he had said too much. 'Sorry, I mean the housekeeper, of course, Signora Mortola – it's *her* you have to read aloud to. I've only chosen the story.'

The Magpie. An image of her flashed into Meggie's mind, watching her with her birdlike eyes. Suppose I bite my tongue,

she thought. Very hard. She had done that a few times by mistake, and once her tongue had swelled up so much she had to talk to Mo in sign language for two days. She looked at Fenoglio for help.

‘Do it!’ he said, to her surprise. ‘Read aloud to the old woman, but make it a condition that you can keep the tin soldier. Tell her anything you like – say you want to play with him because you’re bored to death – and then ask for something else: some sheets of paper and a pencil. Say you want to draw pictures, understand? If she agrees we’ll take it from there.’

Meggie didn’t understand a word of this, but before she could ask Fenoglio what he was planning the door opened, and there was the Magpie herself.

Darius leaped to his feet so quickly at the sight of her that he pushed Meggie’s plate off the table. ‘Oh, I’m sorry, so sorry!’ he stammered, picking up the broken pieces in his bony fingers. He cut his thumb so deeply on the last piece that blood dripped to the wooden floorboards.

‘Get up, you fool!’ snapped Mortola. ‘Have you shown her what she’s to read from?’

Darius nodded, and looked unhappily at his bleeding thumb.

‘Then get out. You can help the women in the kitchen. There are chickens to be plucked.’

Darius made a face, looking disgusted, but he bowed and disappeared into the corridor, but not without casting Meggie a last sympathetic glance.

‘Right!’ said the Magpie, waving to her impatiently. ‘Start reading – and put your mind to it.’

Meggie read the tin soldier out of the story. It was as if he simply fell from the ceiling. ‘He *dropped down three storeys to the street and his bayonet stuck in the earth between two cobblestones.*’ The Magpie reached for him before Meggie could, and stared at him as if he were just a painted toy, while he looked back at

her with horror in his eyes. Then she put him in the pocket of her coarse-knit woollen jacket.

‘Please can I have him?’ stammered Meggie, just as the Magpie reached the doorway. Fenoglio placed himself behind her as if to cover her back, but the Magpie just looked at Meggie with her sharp-nosed gaze. ‘I – I mean, there’s nothing you’d want to do with him,’ Meggie went on uncertainly, ‘and I’m so bored. Please.’

The Magpie looked at her, unmoved. ‘You can have him back when Capricorn has seen him,’ she said, and then she was gone.

‘The paper!’ cried Fenoglio. ‘You forgot to ask for paper and pencil!’

‘I’m sorry,’ murmured Meggie. She hadn’t forgotten, it was just that she didn’t dare ask the Magpie for anything else.

‘Ah, well, I’ll just have to get it by other means,’ said Fenoglio. ‘The only question is, how?’

Meggie went over to the window, rested her forehead on the pane and looked down at the garden, where a couple of Capricorn’s maids were busy tying up tomato plants. What would Mo say, she wondered, if he knew I can do it too? ‘Who did you read out, Meggie? Poor Tinker Bell and the Steadfast Tin Soldier?’ ... ‘Yes,’ murmured Meggie, tracing an invisible ‘M’ on the pane with her finger. Poor fairy, poor tin soldier, poor Dustfinger and – she thought again of the woman with the dark blonde hair. ‘Resa,’ she whispered. TeResa. Teresa was her mother’s name.

She was about to turn away from the window when out of the corner of her eye she saw something appearing above the sill outside – a small furry face. Meggie retreated in alarm.

Do rats climb walls? Yes, but that wasn’t a rat, the animal’s muzzle wasn’t pointed enough. She quickly ran back to the windowpane.

Gwin.

The marten was sitting on the narrow sill, looking in at her with sleepy eyes.

‘Basta!’ muttered Fenoglio behind her. ‘Yes, Basta will get me the paper. That’s a good idea.’

Meggie opened the window very slowly, so that Gwin wouldn’t take fright and perhaps fall off the sill. Even a marten would break all his bones if he fell into the paved yard from this height. She put out her hand, still very slowly. Her fingers trembled as she stroked Gwin’s back. Then she grabbed him before his little teeth could snap at her, and quickly lifted him into the room. She looked anxiously down, but none of the maids had noticed anything. They were all bending over the vegetable patch, their clothes drenched with perspiration from the heat of the sun burning down on their backs.

There was a note under Gwin’s collar. It was dirty, and had been folded very small and tied in place with a piece of tape.

‘Why are you opening the window? The air outside is even hotter than in here. We—’ Fenoglio broke off and stared in amazement at the animal in Meggie’s arms. She quickly put a warning finger to her lips. Then, holding the struggling Gwin tight, she removed the note from under his collar. The marten chattered crossly and snapped at her fingers again. He didn’t like being held too long, and would even bite Dustfinger if he tried it.

‘What have you got there – a rat?’ Fenoglio came closer. Meggie let go of the marten, and Gwin immediately leaped back to the windowsill.

‘A marten!’ cried the astonished Fenoglio. ‘Where did that come from?’ Meggie looked anxiously at the door, but obviously the guard outside had heard nothing. Fenoglio pressed his hand to his mouth, and looked again at Gwin in such amazement that Meggie almost laughed. ‘He’s got horns!’ he whispered.

‘Of course! That’s the way you wrote him!’ she whispered back.

Gwin was still sitting on the windowsill, blinking uncomfortably at the sun. He didn’t like bright light and preferred to sleep through the day. So how had he got here?

Meggie put her head out of the window, but there were still only the maids down in the yard. Hastily, she moved back into the room and unfolded the note.

‘A message?’ Fenoglio leaned over her shoulder. ‘Is it from your father?’

Meggie nodded. She had recognised the writing at once, although it wasn’t as steady as usual. Her heart began dancing inside her. She traced the letters with her eyes as longingly as if they were a path with Mo waiting for her at the end of it.

‘What on earth does it say? I can’t make out a word of it!’ whispered Fenoglio.

Meggie smiled. ‘It’s elvish writing!’ she whispered. ‘Mo and I have been using it as our secret writing ever since I read *The Lord of the Rings*, but he’s probably rather out of practice. He’s made quite a lot of mistakes.’

‘Well, what does it say?’

Meggie read it to him.

‘Farid – who’s he?’

‘A boy. Mo read him out of *The Thousand and One Nights*, but that’s another story. You saw him – when Dustfinger ran away from you Farid was with him.’ Meggie folded the note up again and looked out of the window once more. One of the maids had straightened up. She was brushing the earth off her hands and looking up at the high wall as if she dreamed of flying away over it. Who had brought Gwin here? Mo? Or had the marten found his way by himself? That was most unlikely. He certainly wouldn’t be wandering round in broad daylight unless someone else had a hand in it.

Meggie hid the note in the sleeve of her dress. Gwin was still sitting on the windowsill. Sleepily, he stretched his neck and sniffed at the wall outside. Perhaps he could smell the pigeons who sometimes settled outside the window. 'Feed him some bread so he won't run away!' Meggie whispered to Fenoglio, and then went over to the bed and got her rucksack down. Where was that pencil? She was sure she had a pencil. Yes, there it was, although it was only a small stump. Now, what about paper? She took one of Darius's books out from under the mattress and carefully tore out one of the endpapers. She had never done such a thing before – fancy tearing a page out of a book! – but now she had to. Kneeling on the floor, she began to write in the same curly script that Mo had used for his message. She knew the letters off by heart: *We're all right and I can do it too, Mo! I read Tinker Bell out of her book, and when it gets dark tomorrow Capricorn wants me to bring the Shadow out of 'Inkheart' to come and kill Dustfinger.* She didn't mention Resa. Not a word to show that she thought she had seen her mother, and if Capricorn had his way that she too had only two days to live. A message like that wouldn't fit on a piece of paper no matter how large it was.

Gwin was greedily nibbling the bread Fenoglio had given him. Meggie folded up the endpaper and tied it to his collar. 'Take care!' she whispered to Gwin, and then threw the rest of the bread down into Capricorn's yard. The marten scurried down the wall of the house as if it was the easiest thing in the world. One of the maids screamed as he scampered between her legs, and called out to the others. She was probably alarmed for Capricorn's chickens, but Gwin had already disappeared over the wall.

'Good. Excellent. So your father's here,' Fenoglio whispered to Meggie, standing beside her by the open window. 'Somewhere out there. Very good indeed. And you'll get the tin soldier back. Who was it said that *all's for the best in the best of all possible worlds?*' He rubbed the tip of his nose and blinked

out at the dazzling sunlight. 'So the next thing to do,' he murmured, 'is to play on Basta's superstitions. What a good thing I gave him that little weakness. It was a clever move.'

Meggie had no idea what he was talking about, but that didn't matter to her. She had only one thought in her head: Mo was here.



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A Dark Place

‘Jim, old boy,’ said Lukas ... in a rough voice. ‘That was a short journey. I’m sorry that you must share my fate now.’

Jim swallowed.

‘We’re friends,’ he said quietly, biting his lower lip to keep it from trembling so hard.

The scribes chuckled again, and the bonzes nodded at each other, grinning.

‘Jim Button,’ said Lukas, ‘you really are the best little fellow I ever met in all my life.’

‘Take them to the place of execution!’ commanded the Head Bonze, and the soldiers seized Lukas and Jim to drag them away.

Michael Ende,
Jim Button and Lukas the Engine Driver

Dustfinger had expected Capricorn to leave him and Resa dangling in those dreadful nets until their execution, but they spent only a single if very long night there. In the morning, as soon as the sun cast its bright light on the red walls inside the church, Basta had them brought down. For a few horrible moments Dustfinger thought Capricorn had decided to put an end to them in some quick and inconspicuous way instead, and when he felt solid ground under his feet again he didn’t know

which made him weaker at the knees – that fear or his night in the net. Whichever it was, he could hardly stand upright.

Basta set his mind at rest for the time being, although that was certainly not his intention. ‘Personally, I’d have liked to leave you dangling up there a while longer,’ he said as his men dragged Dustfinger out of the net. ‘But for some reason or other Capricorn’s decided to lock the two of you in the crypt for what’s left of your miserable lives.’

Dustfinger did his best to hide his relief. So death was still a little way off. ‘I expect it bothers Capricorn to have an audience when he’s discussing his filthy plans with the rest of you,’ he said. ‘Or perhaps he just wants us to be able to walk to our execution on our own two legs.’ One more night in that net and Dustfinger wouldn’t even have known he still *had* legs. His bones ached so much after that first night that he was moving like an old man as Basta took him and Resa down to the crypt. Resa stumbled once or twice on the stairs, and seemed to be feeling even worse than he was, but she made not a sound, and when Basta took her arm after she had slipped on one step she shook herself free, giving him such an icy look that he let her go on by herself.

The crypt below the church was a damp, cold place even on days like this when the sun was practically melting the tiles on the houses outside. It smelled of mould and mouse droppings and other things Dustfinger didn’t want to think about. Soon after arriving in the deserted village Capricorn had had gratings fitted over the narrow niches where long-dead priests slept in their stone tombs. ‘What could be more fitting than to make the condemned sleep on coffins?’ he had said at the time, with a laugh. He had always had his own peculiar sense of humour.

Impatiently, Basta pushed them down the last few steps. He was in a hurry to get back to the light of day, away from the dead and their ghosts. His hand shook as he hung his lantern on a hook and opened the grating over the first cell. There was no electric light down here, no heating either, or any other

comforts, only the quiet tombs and the mice scurrying over the cracked flagstones of the floor.

‘Oh, aren’t you going to give us the pleasure of your company a little longer?’ asked Dustfinger as Basta pushed them into the cell. They had to duck. They couldn’t stand upright under the old vaults here. ‘We could tell ghost stories. I know some nice new ones.’

Basta growled like a dog. ‘We won’t be needing any coffin for you, dirtyfingers!’ he said as he closed the grating again.

‘No, indeed! An urn perhaps, a jam jar, but no coffin.’ Dustfinger took a step back from the bars so as to be out of reach of Basta’s knife. ‘I see you have a new amulet,’ he called. Basta had almost reached the steps. ‘Another rabbit’s foot, is it? Didn’t I tell you they attract White Ladies? You could see the White Ladies in our old world. You don’t see them here, which isn’t very practical, but of course they’re still around with their whispering and their icy fingers.’

Basta was standing at the foot of the steps with his fists clenched, his back still turned. Dustfinger was always surprised to find how easily you could scare the man with a few words. ‘Remember how they come for their victims?’ he went on softly. ‘They whisper your name, “Bastaaa!” and next thing you know you’re freezing cold, and then—’

‘They’ll soon be whispering *your* name, dirtyfingers!’ Basta interrupted, his voice shaking. ‘Yours and yours alone.’ And he hurried up the steps as if the ghosts of the White Ladies were already after him.

The sound of his footsteps died away, and Dustfinger was alone – with the silence, with death, and with Resa. They were obviously the only prisoners. Now and then Capricorn had some poor fellow locked in the crypt just to give him a good fright, but most of those who came here and wrote their names on the tombs disappeared some dark night and were never seen again.

Their own departure from this world was going to be rather more spectacular.

My last performance, in a way, thought Dustfinger. Perhaps it will turn out that all this was only a bad dream, and I just had to die to get home again? A nice idea, if only he could have believed in it.

Resa had seated herself on a sarcophagus. It was a plain stone coffin, with a cracked lid, and the name that was once on it could no longer be deciphered. It didn't seem to frighten Resa to be so near the dead. Dustfinger felt differently. He was not afraid of ghosts and White Ladies, like Basta. If a White Lady had appeared he would have passed the time of day with her. No – he was afraid of death. He thought he heard death itself breathing down here, breathing so deeply that no air was left for anyone else. His chest felt as if a huge and ugly animal were sitting on it. Perhaps it hadn't been so bad up there in the net after all. At least they'd had air to breathe.

He sensed Resa watching him. She beckoned him over and patted the lid of the coffin. Hesitantly, he sat down beside her. She put her hand into the pocket of her dress, brought out a candle and held it up to him with an enquiring look. Dustfinger had to smile. Yes, of course he had matches on him. It was child's play to conceal something as small as a few matches from Basta and the other idiots.

Resa fixed the flickering candle to the coffin with a little of its own wax. She loved candles – coloured candles and stones. She always had both in her pockets. But perhaps today she had lit the candle just for him, because she knew how he loved fire.

'I'm sorry. I should have looked for the book on my own,' he said, passing a finger through the bright flame. 'Forgive me.'

She put her fingers on his mouth. Presumably she was saying there was nothing to forgive. What a sweet, silent lie. She took her hand away, and Dustfinger cleared his throat. 'You – you

didn't find it, did you?' Not that it would make any difference now, but he had to know.

Resa shook her head and shrugged her shoulders regretfully.

'That's what I thought.' He sighed. The silence was terrible, worse than a thousand voices. 'Tell me a story, Resa!' he said quietly, moving closer to her. Please, he added in his thoughts. Chase my fear away. It's crushing my chest. Take us somewhere else, somewhere better.

Resa could do that. She knew endless numbers of stories, just how she knew them she had never told him, but of course he knew. He knew exactly who had once read her those stories, for he had recognised her face the instant he first saw her in Capricorn's house. After all, Silvertongue had shown him the photograph often enough.

Resa took a piece of paper out of her inexhaustible pockets. They contained more than just candles and stones. Just as Dustfinger always carried the means of lighting a fire, she always had a number of things with her: candle stumps, a few pebbles, some paper and a pencil – her wooden tongue, she called it. Obviously none of these things had seemed to Capricorn's men dangerous enough to be taken away from her. When Resa told one of her stories she sometimes wrote only half a sentence, and Dustfinger had to finish it. It went faster that way, and the story developed surprising twists and turns. But this time it seemed she didn't want to tell him a story, although he had never needed one so badly.

'Who is the girl?' wrote Resa.

Of course. Meggie. Should he lie? Why not? But he didn't, although he didn't know why not. 'She's Silvertongue's daughter – How old? – Twelve, I think.'

It was the right answer. He saw that in her eyes. They were Meggie's eyes. Perhaps rather wearier.

'What does Silvertongue look like? I think you've asked me that before. Well, he isn't scarred like me.' He tried to smile,

but Resa remained grave. The candlelight flickered on her face. You know his face better than you know mine, thought Dustfinger, but I'm not going to say so. He's taken a whole world from me, why shouldn't I take his wife from him?

Rising to her feet, she put her hand in the air above her head.

'Yes, he's tall. Taller than you, taller than me.' Why didn't he lie to her? 'Yes, he has dark hair, but I don't want to talk about him now!' He heard the petulance in his own voice. 'Please!' Reaching for her hand, he drew her down beside him. 'Tell me a story. The candle will soon go out, and the light Basta's left us is enough to see these wretched coffins but not to read letters.'

She looked at him thoughtfully, as if she were trying to guess at his thoughts and uncover the words he didn't say. But Dustfinger could guard his face better than Silvertongue, much better. He could make it impenetrable, a shield to keep his heart from prying eyes. What business was it of anyone else to know what was in his heart?

Resa bent over the paper again and began to write.

'Hear and attend and listen; for this befell and behappened and became and was, O my Best Beloved, when the Tame animals were wild,' she wrote.

Dustfinger smiled. 'The *Dog was wild*,' he whispered. 'And the *Horse was wild, and the Sheep was wild, and the Pig was wild – as wild as wild could be – and they walked in the Wet Wild Woods by their wild lones. But the wildest of all wild animals was the Cat. He walked by himself, and all places were alike to him.* '

Resa always knew what story he needed at any given moment. She was a stranger in this world, just like him. It couldn't be that she belonged to Silvertongue.



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Farid's Report

‘All right,’ said Spiff. ‘Now this is what I say, anyone who thinks they’ve got a better plan can say so afterwards.’

**Michael de Larrabeiti,
*The Borribles Go for Broke***

When Farid came back Silvertongue was waiting for him. Elinor was asleep under the trees, her face flushed by the midday heat, but Silvertongue was still standing where Farid had left him. Relief spread over his face as he saw the boy coming up the hill.

‘We heard shots!’ he called. ‘I thought we’d never see you again.’

‘They were shooting at cats,’ replied Farid, letting himself drop on to the grass. Silvertongue’s concern made Farid feel awkward. He wasn’t used to people being concerned for his safety. *What kept you? Where have you been all this time?* That was the kind of reception he was used to. Even Dustfinger’s face had always been closed to him, as uncommunicative as a barred door. But with Silvertongue’s face it was different. Anxiety, joy, anger, pain, love – it was all plain to see, written on his brow, even when he tried to hide it, just as he was now trying not to ask the question that must have been on the tip of his tongue ever since he saw Farid approaching.

‘Your daughter’s all right,’ said Farid. ‘And she got your message, though she’s shut up on the top floor of Capricorn’s house. But Gwin is a wonderful climber, even better than Dustfinger, and that’s saying something.’ He heard Silvertongue breathe a sigh of relief, as if all the cares in the world had been lifted from his shoulders.

‘I’ve even brought an answer.’ Farid took Gwin out of the rucksack, held him firmly by the tail and untied Meggie’s note from his collar. Silvertongue unfolded the paper as carefully as if he feared his fingers might wipe away the words. ‘An endpaper,’ he murmured. ‘She must have torn it out of a book.’

‘What does she say?’

‘Have you tried to read it?’

Farid shook his head and took a piece of bread out of his trouser pocket. Gwin had earned a reward. But the marten had disappeared, probably to catch up on his long overdue daytime sleep.

‘You can’t read, is that it?’

‘No.’

‘Well, not many people could read this anyway. It’s the same secret writing that I used. As you saw, not even Elinor can decipher it.’ Silvertongue smoothed out the paper. It was a dull yellow like desert sand. He read – and then suddenly raised his head. ‘Good heavens!’ he murmured. ‘Imagine that!’

‘Imagine what?’ Farid bit into the bread he had been keeping for the marten. It was stale; they’d have to steal some more soon.

‘Meggie can do it too!’ Silvertongue shook his head incredulously and stared at the note in his hand.

Farid propped one elbow on the grass. ‘I know. They’re all talking about it – I heard them. They say she can work magic like you, and now Capricorn doesn’t have to wait for you any more. He doesn’t need you now.’

Silvertongue looked at him as if this idea hadn't yet crossed his mind. 'True,' he murmured. 'Now they'll never let her go. Not of their own accord.' He stared at the words his daughter had written on the paper. To Farid they looked like the tracks left by snakes slithering across the sand.

'What else does she say?'

'They've caught Dustfinger, and Meggie is to read someone out of the book to come ... and kill him. Tomorrow, when it gets dark.' He lowered the note and ran his hand through his hair.

'Yes, I heard about that too.' Farid pulled up a blade of grass and tore it into tiny pieces. 'It seems they've locked him in the crypt under the church. What else is in that note? Doesn't your daughter say who it is she's to fetch out for Capricorn?'

Silvertongue shook his head, but Farid saw that he knew more about it than he was saying.

'Come on, you can tell me! Some kind of executioner, am I right? A man who knows all about cutting off heads.'

Silvertongue acted as if he hadn't heard him.

'I saw something like that once,' said Farid, 'so it's all right for you to tell me about it. If the executioner is good with a sword it's all over quite fast.'

Silvertongue looked at him for a moment, astonished, and then shook his head. 'It's not an executioner,' he said. 'At least, not a man with a sword. Not a man at all.'

Farid turned pale. 'Not a man?'

Silvertongue shook his head. It was some time before he went on. 'They call him the Shadow,' he said in an expressionless voice. 'I don't remember the exact words describing him in the book, all I know is that I pictured him to myself as a figure made completely of burning ashes, red and grey. And without a face.'

Farid stared at him. For a moment he wished he hadn't asked.

‘They – they’re all looking forward to this execution,’ he said in a faltering voice. ‘Those Black Jackets are in a really good mood. They’re going to kill the woman Dustfinger was visiting as well. Because she tried to find the book for him.’ He burrowed his bare toes into the earth. Dustfinger had tried to get him used to wearing shoes because of the snakes, but when you wore shoes you felt as if someone was pinching your toes, so in the end he’d thrown them on the fire.

‘What woman? One of Capricorn’s maids?’ Silvertongue looked at him with a gleam in his eyes.

Farid nodded. He rubbed his toes. They were covered with ant bites. ‘She can’t talk. Dumb as a sand-fly. Dustfinger has a photo of her in his rucksack. She’s probably helped him quite often. And I think he’s in love with her.’

It hadn’t been difficult for Farid to explore the village. There were lots of boys there no older than him. They washed the cars for the Black Jackets, cleaned their boots and their guns, delivered love letters. He’d delivered love letters himself in that other life. He hadn’t had to clean boots, but weapons, yes – and he’d had to shovel camel dung. Polishing cars was much lighter work.

Silvertongue looked up at the sky. Tiny clouds were drifting by, pale as a heron’s feathers, ruffled like acacia flowers. Clouds often passed across this sky. Farid liked that. The desert sky he had known before was always empty.

‘Tomorrow,’ murmured Silvertongue. ‘What am I to do? How am I going to get her out of Capricorn’s house? Perhaps I can get in somehow by night. I’d need one of those black suits the —’

‘I’ve brought you one.’ Farid took first the jacket, then the trousers out of the rucksack. ‘Stole them off a washing line. And a dress for Elinor.’

Silvertongue looked at him with such obvious admiration that Farid blushed. ‘What an extraordinary fellow you are!’

Perhaps I should ask *you* how I'm going to get Meggie out of this village?'

Farid smiled awkwardly and looked at his toes. Ask him? No one had ever asked him for his ideas before. He had always been the scout, the tracker dog. Others had made the plans for robberies, raids, revenge. You didn't ask the dog's opinion. You beat the dog if he didn't obey. 'There are only two of us, and there are at least twenty of them down there,' he said. 'It won't be easy ...'

Silvertongue looked over at their camp site and the woman asleep under the trees. 'Aren't you counting Elinor? You should! She's much fiercer than I am, and just at the moment she is very, very angry.'

Farid had to smile. 'All right, three!' he said. 'Three against twenty.'

'Yes, I know, that doesn't sound good.' Silvertongue stood up, sighing. 'Come on, let's tell Elinor what you've found out,' he said, but Farid stayed where he was in the grass. He picked up one of the dry branches lying everywhere. First-class firewood. There was any amount of it here. In his old life, people would have gone a long, long way for wood like this. They'd have given good money for it. Farid looked at the wood, rubbed his finger over the rough bark, and looked at Capricorn's village.

'We could get fire to help us,' he said.

Silvertongue looked at him blankly. 'What do you mean?'

Farid picked up another stick, and another. He heaped them all up, all the dry twigs and branches. 'Dustfinger showed me how to tame fire. It's like Gwin: it bites if you don't know how to handle it, but if you treat it properly it does as you want. That's what Dustfinger taught me. If we use it at the right time, in the right place ...'

Silvertongue bent down, picked up one of the branches and weighted it in his hand. 'And how are you going to control it

once you've got a fire going? It hasn't rained for ages. The hills will be ablaze before you know it.'

Farid shrugged. 'Only if the wind blows the wrong way.'

But Silvertongue shook his head. 'No,' he said firmly. 'I won't play with fire in these hills unless I can't think of anything else. Let's steal into the village tonight. Maybe we can get past the guards. Maybe they know each other so little they'll think I'm one of them. After all, we managed to slip through their fingers once, so maybe we can do it again.'

'That's a lot of *maybes*,' said Farid.

'I know!' replied Silvertongue. 'I know.'

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Telling Lies to Basta

‘If ye see the laird, tell him what ye hear; tell him this makes the twelve hunner and nineteen time that Jennet Clouston has called down the curse on him and his house, byre and stable, man, guest and master, wife, miss, or bairn – black, black be their fall.’

**Robert Louis Stevenson,
*Kidnapped***

It took Fenoglio only a few words to persuade the guard outside the door that he had to speak to Basta at once. The old man was a gifted liar. He could spin stories out of thin air faster than a spider spins its web.

‘What do you want, old man?’ asked Basta when he was standing in the doorway. He had brought the tin soldier. ‘Here, little witch!’ he said to Meggie, handing her the soldier. ‘I’d have thrown it on the fire, but nobody here listens to me these days.’

The tin soldier started at the word ‘fire’. His moustache bristled, and his eyes looked so alarmed it touched Meggie’s heart. When she put her hands protectively round him she thought she felt his heart beating. She remembered the end of his story: *The soldier melted. The next day when the maid emptied the stove, she found a little tin heart, which was all that was left of him.*

‘That’s right, no one listens to you any more. I can see that for myself!’ Fenoglio looked sympathetically at Basta, as a father might look at his son – which in a way he was. ‘And that’s why I wanted a word with you.’ He lowered his voice and spoke in a conspiratorial whisper. ‘I’m offering you a deal.’

‘A deal?’ Basta scrutinised him with a mixture of wariness and arrogance.

‘Yes, a deal,’ repeated Fenoglio softly. ‘I’m bored here! I’m a scribbler, as you so aptly put it. I need paper to live on much as other people need bread and wine and so forth. Bring me some paper, Basta, and I’ll help you to get those keys back. You remember – the keys that the Magpie took away from you.’

Basta took out his knife. When he snapped it open the tin soldier began trembling so much that the bayonet slipped from his tiny hands. ‘How?’ asked Basta, cleaning his fingernails with the tip of the knife.

Fenoglio bent down to him. ‘I’ll write you a magic charm to put a hex on Mortola. A hex that will keep her in bed for weeks and give you time to show Capricorn you are the rightful keeper of the keys. Of course that kind of charm doesn’t work instantly, it needs time, but believe you me, when it does start to take effect ...’ Fenoglio raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

But Basta only wrinkled his nose in scorn. ‘I’ve already tried with spiders. And parsley and salt. The old woman’s proof against them all.’

‘Parsley and spiders!’ Fenoglio laughed quietly. ‘What a fool you are, Basta! I’m not talking about children’s magic. I mean the magic of the written word. Nothing is more powerful for good or evil, I do assure you.’ Fenoglio lowered his voice to a whisper. ‘I made you yourself out of words and letters, Basta! You and Capricorn.’

Basta flinched. Fear and hatred are closely linked, and Meggie saw both on his face. He believed the old man. He believed every word of it. ‘You’re a sorcerer!’ he muttered. ‘You

and the girl alike – you both ought to be burned like those accursed books, and her father too.’ He quickly spat three times at the old man’s feet.

‘Ah, spitting! What’s that supposed to prevent? The Evil Eye?’ Fenoglio mocked him. ‘That notion of burning us isn’t a very new idea, Basta, but then you never were fond of new ideas. Well, are we in business or aren’t we?’

Basta stared at the tin soldier until Meggie hid him behind her back. ‘Very well!’ he growled. ‘But I shall check what you’ve been scribbling every day, understand?’

How are you going to do that, thought Meggie, when you can’t read? Basta looked at her as if he had heard her thoughts. ‘I know one of the maids,’ he said. ‘She’ll read it to me, so don’t try any tricks, right?’

‘Of course not!’ Fenoglio nodded energetically. ‘Oh yes, and a pen would be a good idea too. A black one if possible.’

Basta brought the pen and a whole stack of white typing paper. Fenoglio sat down at the table with a purposeful look, put the first sheet of paper in front of him, folded it and then tore it neatly into nine parts. He wrote five letters on each piece. They were ornate, barely legible, and always the same. Then he carefully folded these notes, spat once on each, handed them to Basta and told him to hide them as he told him. ‘Three where she sleeps, three where she eats, and three where she works. Then, after three days and three nights, the desired effect will set in. But should the accursed woman find even one of the notes, the magic will instantly turn against *you*.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Basta stared at Fenoglio’s notes as if they would strike him with plague on the spot.

‘Best to hide them where she won’t find them!’ was all that Fenoglio replied as he propelled Basta towards the door.

‘If it doesn’t work, old man,’ growled Basta before he closed the door behind him, ‘I shall decorate your face to match

Dustfinger's.' Then he was gone, and Fenoglio leaned against the closed door with a satisfied smile.

'But it won't work!' whispered Meggie.

'So? Three days are a long time,' replied Fenoglio, sitting down at the table again. 'And I hope we shan't need that long. After all, we want to prevent an execution tomorrow evening, don't we?'

He spent the rest of the day alternately staring into space and writing like a man possessed. More and more of the white sheets were covered with his large handwriting, scrawled impatiently over the paper. Meggie didn't disturb him. She sat by the window with the tin soldier, looking at the hills and wondering exactly where Mo was hiding among all the branches and leaves there. The tin soldier sat beside her, his leg stretched straight out in front of him, looking with fear in his eyes at the world that was so entirely new to him.

Perhaps he was thinking of the paper ballerina he loved so much, or perhaps he wasn't thinking at all. He said not a single word.



46

Woken in the Dead of Night

‘Let us use our magic and enchantments to conjure up a woman out of flowers.’ ... Math and Gwydyon took the flowers of oak and broom and meadowsweet and from these conjured up the loveliest and most beautiful girl anyone had seen; they baptized her with the form of baptism that was used then, and named her Blodeuedd.

**‘Math Son of Mathonwy’,
from *The Mabinogion*,
translated by Jeffrey Gantz**

Night had fallen long ago, but Fenoglio was still writing. Under the table lay the sheets of paper he had crumpled up or torn. He had discarded many more pages than he had laid aside, collecting those few pages very carefully, as if the words themselves might slip off the paper. When one of the maids, a skinny little thing, brought their supper Fenoglio hid the written sheets he had kept beneath the covers of his bed. Basta did not return that evening. Perhaps he was too busy hiding Fenoglio’s magic charms.

Meggie did not go to bed until everything outside was so dark that she couldn’t distinguish the hills from the sky. She left the window open. ‘Good-night,’ she whispered into the dark, as if Mo could hear her. Then she took the tin soldier and clambered up to her bed. She put the little soldier by her pillow. ‘You’re

better off than Tinker Bell, honestly!’ she whispered to him. ‘Basta has her in his room because he thinks fairies bring good luck, and if we ever get out of here I promise I’ll make you a ballerina just like the one in your story.’

The tin soldier said nothing in reply to that either. He just looked at her with his sad eyes, then, barely perceptibly, he nodded. Has he lost his voice too, wondered Meggie, or could he never speak? His mouth did look as if he had never once opened it. If I had the book here, she thought, I could read the story and find out, or I could try to bring the ballerina out of it for him. But the Magpie had the book. She had taken all the books away.

The tin soldier leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. No, the ballerina would only break his heart, thought Meggie before she fell asleep. The last sound she heard was Fenoglio’s pen scribbling over the paper, writing word after word as fast as a weaver’s shuttle turning threads into colourfully patterned cloth ...

Meggie did not dream of monsters that night – not even a spider scurried through her dream. Even though she dreamed of a room that appeared to be the bedroom in Elinor’s house, she knew that she was at home. Mo was there, too, and so was her mother. She looked like Elinor, but Meggie knew she was the woman who had been in the net hanging beside Dustfinger in Capricorn’s church. You know a great many things in dreams, often despite the evidence of your eyes. You just *know* them. She was about to sit down next to her mother on the old sofa surrounded by Mo’s bookshelves when someone suddenly whispered her name. ‘Meggie!’ Again and again: ‘Meggie!’ She didn’t want to hear it, she wanted the dream to go on and on, but the voice kept calling to her. Meggie recognised it. Reluctantly, she opened her eyes. Fenoglio was standing by her bed, his ink-stained fingers as black as the night beyond the open window.

‘What’s the matter? Let me sleep.’ Meggie turned her back to him. She wanted to return to her dream. Perhaps it was still somewhere there behind her closed eyelids. Perhaps a little of its happiness still clung like gold dust to her lashes. Don’t dreams in fairy tales sometimes leave a token behind? The tin soldier was still asleep, with his head sunk on his chest.

‘I’ve finished!’ Fenoglio whispered. Even with the guard’s snores reverberating through the door, she couldn’t ignore it.

Meggie yawned and sat up.

A thin pile of handwritten sheets of paper lay on the table in the light of the flickering candle.

‘We’re going to try an experiment!’ whispered Fenoglio. ‘Let’s see whether your voice and my words can change what happens in a story. We’re going to try to send the little soldier back.’ He quickly picked up the hand-written sheets and put them on her lap. ‘It’s not the best of ideas to try the experiment with a story I didn’t write myself, but that can’t be helped. What do we have to lose?’

‘Send him back? But I don’t want to send him back!’ said Meggie, horrified. ‘He’ll die if he goes back. The little boy throws him into the stove and he melts. And the ballerina burns up.’ *Among the ashes lay the metal spangle from the ballerina’s dress; it had been burned as black as coal.*

‘No, no!’ Fenoglio impatiently tapped the sheets of paper on her lap. ‘I’ve written him a new story with a happy ending. *That* was your father’s idea: changing what happens in stories! He just wanted to get your mother back, he wanted *Inkheart* rewritten to give her up again. But if the idea really works, Meggie – if you can change the fate of a character you read out of a book by adding new words to his story, then maybe you can change everything about it: who comes out, who goes in, how it ends, who’s happy and who’s unhappy afterwards. Do you understand? It’s just a trial run, Meggie! If the tin soldier disappears, then believe me, we can change *Inkheart* too! I still

have to work out just how, but for now, will you read this aloud. Please!’ Fenoglio took the torch out from under the pillow and put it in Meggie’s hand.

Hesitantly, she turned the beam on the first densely written page. Suddenly her mouth went dry. ‘Does it really end well?’ She ran her tongue over her lips and looked at the sleeping tin soldier. She thought she heard a tiny snore.

‘Yes, yes, I’ve written a truly sentimental happy ending.’ Fenoglio nodded impatiently. ‘He moves into the toy castle with the ballerina and they live happily ever after – no melted heart, no burnt paper, nothing but their blissful love.’

‘Your writing is difficult to read.’

‘What? I went to endless trouble!’

‘It’s difficult all the same.’

The old man sighed.

‘Oh, all right,’ said Meggie. ‘I’ll try.’

Every letter, she thought, every single letter matters! Let the words echo, ring out, whisper and rustle and roll like thunder. Then she began to read.

At the third sentence the tin soldier sat bolt upright. Meggie saw him out of the corner of her eye. For a moment she almost lost the thread of the story, stumbled over a word and re-read it. After that she dared not look at the little soldier again – until Fenoglio put his hand on her arm.

‘He’s gone!’ he breathed. ‘Meggie, he’s gone!’

He was right. The bed was empty.

Fenoglio squeezed her arm so hard that it hurt. ‘You truly are a little enchantress!’ he whispered. ‘And I didn’t do so badly myself, did I? No, definitely not.’ He looked with some awe at his ink-stained fingers. Then he clapped his hands and danced round the cramped room like an old bear. When he finally stopped beside Meggie’s bed again he was rather breathless. ‘You and I are about to prepare a most unpleasant surprise for

Capricorn!’ he whispered, a smile lurking in every one of his wrinkles. ‘I’ll set to work at once! Oh yes, he’ll get what he wants: you’ll read the Shadow out of the book for him. But his old friend will be slightly changed! I guarantee that! I, Fenoglio, master of words, enchanter in ink, sorcerer on paper. I made Capricorn and I shall destroy him as if he’d never existed – which I have to admit would have been better! Poor Capricorn! He’ll be no better off than the magician who conjured up a flower maiden for his nephew. Do you know that story?’

Meggie was staring at the place where the tin soldier had been. She missed him. ‘No,’ she muttered. ‘What flower maiden?’

‘It’s a very old story. I’ll tell you the short version. The long one is better, but it will soon be light. Well – there was once a magician called Gwydyon who had a nephew. He loved his nephew better than anything in the world, but his mother had put a curse on the young man.’

‘Why?’

‘It would take too long to tell that part now. Anyway, she cursed him. If he ever touched a woman he would die. This broke the magician’s heart – must his favourite nephew be condemned to being sad and lonely for ever? No. Was he not a magician? So he shut himself up in the chamber where he worked magic for three days and three nights and made a woman out of flowers – the flowers of oak and broom and meadowsweet, to be precise. There was never a more beautiful woman in the world, and Gwydyon’s nephew fell in love with her at first sight. But Blodeuedd, for that was her name, was his undoing. She fell in love with another man, and the two of them killed the magician’s nephew.’

‘Blodeuedd!’ Meggie savoured the name like an exotic fruit. ‘How sad. What happened to her? Did the magician kill her too as a punishment?’

‘No. Gwydyon turned her into an owl, and to this day all owls sound like a weeping woman.’

‘That’s beautiful! Sad and beautiful,’ murmured Meggie. Why were sad stories often so beautiful? It was different in real life. ‘Right, so now I know the story of the flower maiden,’ she said. ‘But what does it have to do with Capricorn?’

‘The point is that Blodeuedd didn’t do what was expected of her. And that’s our own plan: your voice and my words, beautiful, brand-new words, will see to it that Capricorn’s Shadow does *not* do what’s expected of him!’ Fenoglio looked as pleased as a tortoise who has found a fresh lettuce leaf somewhere entirely unexpected.

‘Then what exactly is he to do?’

Fenoglio wrinkled his brow. His satisfaction was all gone. ‘I’m still working on that,’ he said crossly, tapping his forehead. ‘In here. It takes time.’

Voices were raised outside – men’s voices. They came from the other side of the wall. Meggie slipped quickly off her bed and ran to the open window. She heard footsteps, rapid, stumbling, fleeing footsteps – and then shots. She leaned out of the window so far that she almost fell out, but she could see nothing. The noise seemed to come from the square outside the church.

‘Careful!’ whispered Fenoglio, grasping her shoulders. More shots were heard. Capricorn’s men were calling to each other. Their voices sounded angry and excited – oh, why couldn’t she make out what they were saying? She looked at Fenoglio, her eyes full of fear. Perhaps he had been able to understand some of the shouting – words, names?

‘I know what you’re thinking, but it certainly wasn’t your father,’ he soothed her. ‘He wouldn’t be crazy enough to creep into Capricorn’s house at night!’ Gently, he drew her back from the window. The voices died away. The night became still again as if nothing had happened.

Her heart beating fast, Meggie went back to bed. Fenoglio helped her up.

‘Make him kill Capricorn!’ she whispered. ‘Make the Shadow kill him.’ Her own words frightened her, but she did not take them back.

Fenoglio rubbed his forehead. ‘Yes, I suppose I must, mustn’t I?’ he murmured.

Meggie took Mo’s sweater and held it close. Doors slammed somewhere in the house; the sound of footsteps echoed up to them. Then all was silent again. It was a *menacing* silence. A deathly silence, thought Meggie. The word kept going through her mind.

‘Suppose the Shadow doesn’t obey you?’ she asked. ‘Like the flower maiden. Then what?’

‘We had better not even think of that,’ replied Fenoglio slowly.



47

Alone

‘Why, O why did I ever leave my hobbit-hole!’ said poor Mr Baggins bumping up and down on Bombur’s back.

**J.R.R. Tolkien,
*The Hobbit***

When Elinor heard the shots she jumped up so fast that she stumbled over her blanket in the dark and fell full length in the coarse grass. It pricked her hands as she got up. ‘Oh God, oh God, they’ve caught them!’ she stammered, groping round in the night looking for the stupid dress the boy had stolen for her. It was so dark that she could scarcely see her own feet. ‘Oh, it serves them right,’ she kept repeating to herself. ‘Why didn’t they take me with them, the stupid idiots? I could have kept watch, I’d have been on the alert.’ But when she had finally found the dress and pulled it over her head with trembling fingers she suddenly stood still.

How quiet it was. Deathly quiet.

They’ve shot them, something whispered inside her. That’s why it’s so quiet. They’re dead. Dead as mutton. They’re lying bleeding in that square outside the house, both of them. Oh, my God! Now what? She sobbed. No, Elinor, no tears now. What use are tears? You must look for them, come on. She stumbled off. Was she going the right way?

‘No, you can’t come too, Elinor,’ Mortimer had said. He had looked so different in the black suit Farid had stolen for him – like one of Capricorn’s men, which of course was the point of the masquerade. The boy had even found him a shotgun.

‘Why not?’ she had replied. ‘I’ll even put that silly dress on!’

‘A woman would be conspicuous, Elinor! You’ve seen for yourself – there are never any women in the streets at night. Only the guards. Ask the boy.’

‘I don’t want to ask him! Why didn’t he steal a suit for me too? Then I could have disguised myself as a man.’

They had no answer to that.

‘Elinor, please, we need someone to stay with our things!’

‘Our things? You mean Dustfinger’s dirty rucksack?’ She was so angry she had kicked it. How clever they’d thought themselves, but their disguise had done them no good! Who had recognised them? Basta, Flatnose, the man with the limp? ‘We’ll be back by dawn, Elinor, with Meggie,’ Mo had said. Liar! She could tell from his voice that he didn’t believe it himself. Elinor stumbled over a tree root, grabbed at something prickly, and fell to her knees sobbing. Murderers! Murderers and fire-raisers. What had she to do with people like that? She should have known better when Mortimer suddenly turned up at her door, asking her to hide the book. Why hadn’t she just said no? Hadn’t she thought instantly that the matchstick-eater looked like someone with the word *trouble* written all over him in red? But the book – ah, the book. Of course she hadn’t been able to resist the book.

They took that stinking marten with them, she thought as she picked herself up again, but not me. And now they’re dead. ‘Let’s go to the police!’ How often she’d said that! But Mortimer had always given the same answer. ‘No, Elinor, Capricorn would get Meggie well out of the way as soon as the first police officer set foot in the village. And believe me, Basta’s knife is faster than all the police in the world.’ As he spoke she had seen

that little frown above his nose, and she knew him well enough to know what it meant.

What was she going to do? She was alone, after all.

Don't make such a fuss, Elinor, she told herself. You've always been alone, remember. Now, use your head. Whatever's happened to her father, you must help the girl – get her out of this thrice-accursed village. There's no one left but you to do it. If you don't, she'll end up as one of those timid maidservants who scarcely dare to raise their heads and whose only purpose is to clean and cook for their ghastly master. Perhaps she'll be allowed to read aloud to Capricorn now and then, when he feels like it, and then, when she's older ... she's a pretty little thing. Elinor felt sick. 'I need a shotgun,' she whispered, 'or a knife, a big sharp knife. I'll slip into Capricorn's house with it. Who's going to recognise me in this unspeakable dress?' Mortimer had always thought she couldn't cope with the world except between the covers of a book, but she'd show him!

Just how will you do that? asked the little whispering voice inside. He's gone, Elinor, gone like your books.

She wept, so loudly that she alarmed even herself and put a hand to her mouth. A twig cracked under her feet, and the light went out behind one of the windows in Capricorn's village. She had been right. The world was a terrible place, cruel, pitiless, dark as a bad dream. Not a good place to live in. Only in books could you find pity, comfort, happiness – and love. Books loved anyone who opened them, they gave you security and friendship and didn't ask anything in return, they never went away, never, not even when you treated them badly. *Love, truth, beauty, wisdom and consolation against death.* Who had said that? Someone else who loved books, she couldn't remember the author's name, only the words. Words are immortal – until someone comes along and burns them.

She stumbled on, getting closer all the time. Pale light seeped from Capricorn's village, like milky water running into the

night. Three of the murderers were standing among the vehicles in the car park with their heads together. 'Talk away!' whispered Elinor. 'Boast, why don't you, with your bloodstained fingers and black hearts – you'll be sorry yet for killing them.' Would it be better to go down straight away or wait until daylight? Both were mad ideas; she wouldn't get beyond the third house in the village. One of the three men looked round, and for a moment Elinor thought he could see her. She scrambled back, slipped, and grabbed at a branch before she lost her footing again. Then came a rustling behind her, and a hand covered her mouth before she could look round. She wanted to scream, but the fingers were pressing so hard on her lips that she couldn't utter a sound.

'So here you are. Any idea how long I've been looking for you?'

It couldn't be true. She had been so sure she would never hear that voice again.

'Mortimer!'

'Sorry, but I knew you'd scream! Come on!' Mortimer took his hand away from her mouth and gestured to her to follow him. She wasn't sure which she wanted to do most, fling her arms round his neck or hit him hard enough to hurt.

Only when the houses of Capricorn's village were almost out of sight behind the trees did he stop. 'Why didn't you stay at the camp? Staggering round here in the dark – have you any idea how dangerous it is?'

This was too much. He had walked so fast that Elinor was still gasping for breath. 'Dangerous?' In her fury she found it difficult to keep her voice down. 'You're a fine one to talk about danger! I thought you were both dead! I thought they'd stabbed you or shot you or ...'

He rubbed a weary hand over his face. 'Some of them are pretty poor shots,' he said. 'Luckily.'

His calm tone made Elinor want to shake him. 'Really? And what about the boy?'

'He's all right too, except for a scratch on his forehead. When they started firing the marten ran away and Farid went after him. That's when a ricochet caught him. I've left him up at the camp.'

'The marten? Is that all you can think about, that vicious, stinking animal? Tonight has aged me by ten years!' Elinor's voice was rising again, and she forced herself to lower it. 'I put on this horrible dress,' she hissed. 'And I could see you in my mind's eye, lots of blood and terrible wounds ... oh, must you look at me like that?' she snapped. 'It's a wonder you're not both dead. I should never have listened to you. We should have gone to the police. This time they must believe us, they—'

'It was bad luck, Elinor, that's all,' Mo interrupted. 'Honestly. It just happened to be Cockerell on guard outside the house. The others wouldn't have recognized me.'

'And what about tomorrow? Perhaps it'll be Basta or Flatnose then. How's it going to help your daughter if you're dead?'

Mo turned his back to her. 'But I'm not dead, Elinor,' he said evenly. 'And I'm going to get Meggie out of there before she has to play the leading role at an execution.'

When they reached their camp Farid was asleep. The bloodstained bandage Mortimer had tied round his head looked almost like the turban he had been wearing when he first appeared among the columns of Capricorn's church.

'It looks worse than it is,' Mo whispered. 'But if I hadn't held him back he'd have chased half-way round the village after that marten. And if they hadn't caught us I expect he'd have slipped into the church too, to see how Dustfinger was doing.'

Elinor only nodded and wrapped her blanket round her. It was a mild night; anywhere else it could have been called peaceful.

‘How did you shake them off?’ she asked.

Mortimer sat down beside the boy. Only now did Elinor see that he was carrying the shotgun Farid had stolen for him. He took it off his shoulder and put it down in the grass beside him. ‘They didn’t follow us for long,’ he said. ‘Why bother? They know we’ll be back. All they have to do is wait.’

And this time Elinor would be with them, she promised herself. She never again wanted to feel as utterly deserted as she had this night. ‘What are you planning to do next?’ she asked.

‘Farid’s idea was to start a fire. I thought that would be too dangerous, but we’re running short of time.’

‘Fire?’ Elinor felt as if the word would burn her tongue. Ever since she had found the ashes of her books, the mere sight of a matchstick had caused her to panic.

‘Dustfinger’s taught the boy something about handling fire, and anyway, as we know, even the biggest fool can start one. If we were to send Capricorn’s house up in flames—’

‘Are you crazy? Suppose it spreads to the hills?’

Mo bowed his head and stroked his hand over the barrel of the gun. ‘I know,’ he said, ‘but I can’t see any other way. The fire will create a diversion, Capricorn’s men will be kept busy putting it out, and in all the confusion I’ll try to get through to Meggie while Farid releases Dustfinger.’

‘You’re mad!’ This time Elinor couldn’t help her voice rising. Farid muttered something in his sleep, put his hand nervously to the bandage round his head, then turned over.

Mo straightened the boy’s blanket and leaned back against the tree trunk. ‘That’s our plan, all the same, Elinor,’ he said. ‘Believe me, I’ve been racking my brains till I thought I’d go crazy. But there’s no other way. And if none of that is any use I’ll set fire to his damn church as well. I’ll melt down his gold

and reduce his whole damned village to dust and ashes, but I'll have my daughter back.'

Elinor had no answer to that. She lay down and pretended to be asleep even though she couldn't sleep a wink. When day dawned, she persuaded Mortimer to get a little rest himself while she kept watch. Before long he was fast asleep. As soon as his breath sounded peaceful and regular, Elinor took off the stupid dress, got into her own clothes, combed her tousled hair and wrote him a note. *Gone to get help. Back around midday. Please don't do anything until then. Elinor.*

She put the note into his half-opened hand, so that he would see it as soon as he woke up. As she tip-toed past the boy she saw that the marten was back. He was curled up beside Farid, licking his paws. His black eyes stared at Elinor as she bent over the boy to adjust his bandage. Uncanny little beast, she could never take to him, but Farid loved him like a dog. Sighing, she straightened up. 'Look after them both, will you?' she whispered, then set off. The car was still where she had hidden it under the trees. It was a good hiding-place; the branches hung so low that she missed the car herself at first. The engine caught immediately. Elinor listened anxiously to the sounds of the morning for a moment, but there was nothing to be heard apart from the birds greeting the day as exuberantly as if it were their last.

The nearest village, the last village through which she and Mortimer had driven, was scarcely half an hour's drive away. There was sure to be a police station there.



48

The Magpie

But they woke him with words, their cruel, bright weapons.

**T.H. White,
*The Book of Merlin***

It was still quite early when Meggie heard Basta's voice out in the corridor. She hadn't touched the breakfast one of the maids brought them. When she had asked what had happened last night, what the shots meant, the girl had just stared at her, terrified, shook her head and scurried out of the door. She probably thought Meggie was a witch.

Fenoglio hadn't eaten any breakfast either. He was writing. He wrote and wrote without stopping, filling sheet after sheet of paper, tearing up what he'd written, beginning again, putting one sheet aside and starting another, frowning, crumpling up the paper – and starting once more. Hours and hours passed like this, until there were only three sheets of paper he hadn't torn up. Just three. At the sound of Basta's voice he hastily hid them under his mattress, kicking the crumpled pieces of paper under the bed with his foot. 'Quick, Meggie! Help me get them under the bed!' he whispered. 'He mustn't find any – not a single one.' Meggie obeyed, but all she could think about was why Basta was here. Was he going to tell her something? Did he want to see her face when he told her not to expect Mo any more?

Fenoglio had sat down at the table again in front of a blank sheet of paper and was rapidly scribbling a few words on it when the door opened.

Meggie held her breath as if that would hold back the words which were about to come out of Basta's mouth and stab her in the heart. Fenoglio put down his pen and went to stand beside her. 'What is it?' he asked.

'I'm to fetch her,' said Basta. 'Mortola wants to see her.' He sounded angry, as if it were beneath his dignity to carry out such a trivial task.

Mortola? The Magpie? Meggie looked at Fenoglio. What did this mean? But the old man only shrugged his shoulders, at a loss.

'This little pigeon's to take a look at what she's to read this evening,' Basta explained. 'So she won't stumble over the words like Darius and spoil everything.' He beckoned impatiently to Meggie. 'Come on.'

Meggie took a step towards him but then stopped. 'First, I want to know what happened last night,' she asked. 'I heard shots.'

'Oh, that!' Basta smiled. His teeth were almost as white as his shirt. 'I've an idea your father was planning to visit you, but Cockerell wouldn't let him in.'

Meggie stood there as if rooted to the spot. Basta took her arm and pulled her roughly away with him. Fenoglio tried to follow them, but Basta slammed the door in his face. Fenoglio called something after her, but Meggie couldn't hear what it was. There was a rushing sound in her ears as if she were listening to her own blood running far too fast through her veins.

'He managed to get away, if that makes you feel any better,' said Basta, shoving her towards the staircase. 'Not that that means much, come to think of it. When Cockerell shoots at the cats, they seem to dodge the bullets too. He's such a useless

shot. But they're usually found dead in a corner somewhere later.'

Meggie kicked his shin with all her might, and raced away down the stairs, but Basta soon caught up with her. His face distorted with pain, he grabbed her by the hair and hauled her back in front of him. 'Don't you try that again, sweetheart!' he hissed. 'You can think yourself lucky you're the main attraction at our festivities this evening, or I'd wring your skinny little neck here and now.'

Meggie did not try it again. Even if she had wanted to she wouldn't have had the chance. Basta kept hold of her hair, pulling her along behind him as if she were a disobedient dog. The pain brought tears to Meggie's eyes, but she kept her face turned away so that Basta couldn't see them. He took her down to the cellars. She hadn't been in this part of Capricorn's house before. The ceiling was even lower than the one in the shed where she, Mo and Elinor had first been imprisoned. The walls were whitewashed, like the walls in the upper storeys of the house, and there were just as many doors. Most of them looked as if it was a long time since they'd been opened, and heavy padlocks hung in front of some of them. Meggie thought of the safes Dustfinger had talked about, and the gold Mo had brought tumbling into Capricorn's church. They didn't get him, she thought. Of course not. The man with the limp doesn't shoot well. Basta said so himself.

At last, they stopped outside a door. It was made of different wood from the other doors down here, wood with a beautiful grain like a tiger's coat that shimmered with a tinge of red under the naked electric bulbs that lit the cellars.

'And let me tell you,' Basta whispered to Meggie before he knocked on the door, 'if you're as impertinent to Mortola as you are to me she'll sling you in one of those nets in the church until you're so hungry you'll be gnawing at the ropes. Compared to her heart, mine's as soft as a little girl's cuddly toy.' His peppermint-scented breath wafted into Meggie's face.

She would never again be able to eat anything smelling of peppermint.

The Magpie's room was large enough to hold a dance in. The walls were red, like the walls in the church, but you couldn't see much of them. They were covered with photographs in gold frames, photographs of houses and people crammed close together on the walls like a crowd in a space too small for it. In the middle, framed in gold like the photos but much larger, hung a portrait of Capricorn. Even Meggie could see that whoever had painted it was no more skilled at his trade than the sculptor who had carved the statue in the church. Capricorn's features in the picture were rounder and softer than in real life, and his curiously feminine mouth lay like a strange fruit below the nose, which was a little too short and broad. It was only his eyes that the painter had caught perfectly. As cold as they were in the flesh, they looked down on Meggie like the eyes of a man examining a frog he is about to slit open to see what it looks like inside. No face, she had learned in Capricorn's village, is as terrifying as a face without pity.

The Magpie sat, curiously rigid, in a green velvet armchair directly below her son's portrait. She looked unaccustomed to sitting down – like a constantly busy woman who resented having to stop, but whose body forced her to rest. Meggie saw that the old woman's legs were swollen above her ankles. They bulged formlessly below her bony knees. Noticing her glance, the Magpie pulled her skirt well down over those knees.

'Have you told her what she's here for?' She found standing up difficult. Meggie watched her support herself with one hand on a little table, her lips pressed together. Basta seemed to enjoy her frailty; a smile played round his mouth until the Magpie looked at him, wiping it away with a single icy glance. Impatiently, she beckoned Meggie over. Basta prodded her in the back when she didn't move.

'Come here. I want to show you something.' With slow but firm steps, the Magpie walked over to a chest of drawers that

looked much too heavy for its gracefully curved legs. Two lamps stood on it, their shades patterned with flowery tendrils. Between them was a wooden casket, decorated all the way round with a pattern of tiny holes. When the Magpie opened its lid Meggie flinched back. Two snakes, thin as lizards and not much longer than Meggie's lower arm, lay in the casket.

'I always keep my room nice and warm so that this pair don't get too sleepy,' explained the Magpie, opening the top drawer of the chest and taking out a glove. It was made of stout black leather, and was so stiff that she had difficulty forcing her gnarled hand into it. 'Your friend Dustfinger played a nasty trick on poor Resa when he asked her to look for that book,' she continued, reaching into the box and grasping one of the snakes firmly behind its flat head.

'Come here!' she ordered Basta, and held the wriggling snake out to him. Meggie saw from his face that everything in him felt revulsion, but he came closer and took the creature. He held the scaly body well away from him as it wound and twisted in the air.

'As you see, Basta doesn't care for my snakes!' said the Magpie, with a smile. 'He never did, not that that means much. As far as I know Basta doesn't like anything but his knife. He also believes that snakes bring bad luck, which of course is pure nonsense.' Mortola handed Basta the second snake. Meggie saw the viper's tiny poison fangs when it opened its mouth. For a moment, she almost felt sorry for Basta.

'Well, don't you think this is a good hiding-place?' asked the Magpie, reaching into the casket yet again. This time she brought out a book. Meggie would have known what book it was even if she hadn't recognised the coloured jacket. 'I've often kept valuables in this casket,' continued the Magpie. 'No one knows about it and its contents apart from Basta and Capricorn. Poor Resa searched high and low for this book – she's a brave creature – but she didn't get as far as my casket. As it happens, she likes snakes. I've never met anyone who feels

less fear of them than Resa, although she's been bitten now and then, isn't that so, Basta?' The Magpie took off her glove and looked scornfully at him. 'Basta likes to use snakes to scare women who reject his advances. It didn't work with Resa. How did it go exactly – didn't she finally put the snake outside *your* door, Basta?'

Basta did not reply. The snakes were still twisting and turning in his hands. One of them had wound its tail around his arm.

'Put them back in the casket,' the Magpie ordered. 'But be careful not to hurt them.' Then she returned to her armchair with the book. 'Sit down!' she said, pointing to the footstool beside her.

Meggie obeyed. Surreptitiously, she looked around her. Mortola's room reminded her of a fairy-tale treasure chest filled to the brim. But there was too much of everything – too many golden candlesticks, too many lamps, rugs, pictures, vases, china ornaments, silk flowers, gilded bells.

The Magpie looked at her smugly. In her plain black dress she sat there like a cuckoo that has forced its way into another bird's nest. 'A fine room for a domestic servant, don't you think?' she said with satisfaction. 'Capricorn knows how to value me.'

'But he still makes you live in the cellar!' replied Meggie. 'Even though you're his mother.' If only words could be swallowed – caught and slipped quickly back between your lips.

The Magpie looked at her with such hatred that Meggie almost felt the woman's bony fingers on her throat. But Mortola just sat there, her birdlike eyes looking fixedly at Meggie. 'Who told you that? The old sorcerer?'

Meggie clamped her lips together and looked at Basta. He probably hadn't heard a word; he was just putting the second snake back in the casket. Did he know Capricorn's little secret? Before she could wonder about that any more Mortola put the book on her lap.

‘A word about this to anyone here, or indeed anywhere else,’ hissed the Magpie, ‘and I personally shall prepare your next meal. A little extract of monkshood, a few shoots of yew or perhaps a couple of hemlock seeds in the sauce, how do you fancy that? I can assure you you’d find it a hard meal to digest. Now, start reading.’

Meggie stared at the book on her lap. When Capricorn held it up in the church she hadn’t been able to make out the picture on the jacket. Now she had a chance to see it at close quarters. There was a landscape in the background that looked like a slightly different version of the hills surrounding Capricorn’s village. But the foreground showed a heart, a black heart surrounded by red flames.

‘Go on, open it!’ snapped the Magpie.

Meggie obeyed. She opened the book at the page beginning with the N and the horned marten perched on it. How long ago was it since she had stood in Elinor’s library looking at the same page? An eternity, a whole lifetime?

‘Wrong page. Go on,’ the Magpie told her. ‘Find the page with the corner turned down.’

Wordlessly, Meggie obeyed. There was no picture on that page or the one opposite it. Without thinking she smoothed the corner out with her thumbnail. Mo hated to see dog-eared pages.

‘What’s the idea? Do you want to make it difficult for me to find the place again?’ hissed the Magpie. ‘Begin with the second paragraph, but mind you don’t read aloud. I don’t want to find the Shadow here in my room.’

‘How far shall I go? I mean, how far am I to read this evening?’

‘How should I know?’ The Magpie leaned over and rubbed her left leg. ‘How long does it usually take you to read your fairies and tin soldiers and so forth out of their stories?’

Meggie lowered her head. Poor Tinker Bell. 'I can't say,' she murmured. 'It depends. Sometimes it happens soon, sometimes not until after many pages, or not at all.'

'Well, read the whole chapter, that ought to be enough! And you can leave out the "not at all" business.' The Magpie rubbed her other leg. They were both wrapped in bandages that could be seen through the dark stockings she wore. 'What are you staring at?' she hissed at Meggie. 'Can you read me something out of a book to do my legs good? Do you know a story with a cure for old age and death in it, little witch that you are?'

'No,' whispered Meggie.

'Then don't gawp so stupidly, look at the book. Mind you notice every word. I don't want to hear you stumble once tonight, no stammering, no mispronunciations, understood? This time Capricorn is to get exactly what he wants. I shall see to that.'

Meggie let her eyes wander over the letters. She wasn't taking in a word of what she read; she could think of nothing but Mo and the shots fired in the night. But she pretended to be reading, on and on, while Mortola never took her eyes off her. Finally, she raised her head and closed the book. 'Finished,' she said.

'What, already?' The Magpie looked at her suspiciously.

Meggie did not reply. She glared at Basta. He was leaning on Mortola's armchair looking bored. 'I'm not going to read that aloud this evening,' she said. 'You shot my father last night. Basta told me. I won't read a word.'

The Magpie turned to Basta. 'What was the idea of that?' she asked angrily. 'Do you think the child will read better if you break her silly heart? Tell her you missed him and get on with it.'

Basta lowered his head like a boy caught doing wrong by his mother. 'I did tell her, well ... almost,' he growled. 'Cockerell's a terrible shot. Your father didn't suffer so much as a scratch.'

Meggie closed her eyes with relief. She felt warm and wonderful. Everything was all right, or at least what wasn't all right soon would be.

Happiness made her bold. 'There's something else,' she said. Why should she be afraid? They needed her. She was the only one who could read their wretched Shadow out of the book for them, no one else could do it – except Mo, and they hadn't caught him yet. They would never catch him now, ever.

'What is it?' The Magpie smoothed her sternly pinned-up hair. What had she looked like when she was Meggie's age? Had her lips been so mean even then?

'I shall only read if I can see Dustfinger again. Before he ...' She did not end the sentence.

'What for?'

Because I want to tell him we're going to try to save him, and because I think my mother is with him, thought Meggie, but naturally she did not say so out loud. 'I want to tell him I'm sorry,' she replied instead. 'After all, he helped us.'

Mortola's mouth twisted mockingly. 'How touching!' she said.

I only want to see her once, close to, thought Meggie. Perhaps it isn't her after all. Perhaps ...

'Suppose I say no?' The Magpie was watching her like a cat playing with a young and inexperienced mouse.

But Meggie had been expecting that question. 'Then I shall bite my tongue!' she said. 'I shall bite it so hard that it swells right up and I won't be *able* to read aloud this evening.'

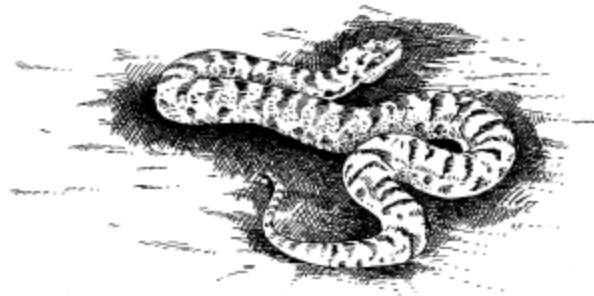
The Magpie leaned back in her chair and laughed. 'Hear that, Basta? The child is no fool!' Basta only grunted. But Mortola studied Meggie, almost benevolently. 'I'll tell you something: yes, you can have your silly little wish. But about this evening: before you read, I want you to have a good look at my photographs.'

Meggie glanced round.

‘Look at them closely. Do you see all those faces? Every one of those people made an enemy of Capricorn, and none of them was ever heard of again. The houses you see in the photographs are no longer standing either, not one of them, they have all been burnt down. Think of those photos when you’re reading, little witch. Should you stumble over the words, or get any silly notions about simply holding your tongue, then your face will soon be looking out of one of these pretty gold frames too. But if you do well we’ll let you go back to your father. Why not? Read like an angel tonight, and you’ll see him again! I’ve been told that his voice clothes every word in silk and satin, turns it into flesh and blood. And that’s how you are to read aloud, not uncertainly and stammering like that fool Darius. Do you understand?’

Meggie looked at her. ‘I understand!’ she said quietly, although she knew for certain that the Magpie was lying.

They would never let her go back to Mo. He would have to come and fetch her.



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Basta's Pride and Dustfinger's Cunning

‘Still, I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We’re in one, of course; but I mean: put into words, you know, told by the fireside, or read out of a great big book with red and black letters, years and years afterwards. And people will say: “Let’s hear about Frodo and the Ring!” And they’ll say: “Yes, that’s one of my favourite stories.”’

J.R.R. Tolkien,
‘The Two Towers’
from *The Lord of the Rings*

Basta was grumbling to himself non-stop as he escorted Meggie over to the church. ‘Bite her tongue, would she? Since when has the old woman fallen for that kind of thing? And who has to take this little madam to the crypt? Basta, of course! What am I supposed to be – the only male maidservant in the place?’

‘Crypt?’ Meggie had thought the prisoners were still in the nets, but she could see no trace of them when she and Basta entered the church, and Basta had impatiently pushed her past the columns.

‘Yes, the crypt,’ he spat. ‘Where we put the dead and those who soon will be. Down here. Get on with it. I’ve got better

things to do today than baby-sit Miss Silvertongue.'

The stairs to which he was pointing were steep and led down into darkness. The treads were worn, and so uneven that Meggie stumbled at every other step. Down below it was so dark that at first she didn't realise the staircase had come to an end, and she was feeling for the next step with her foot when Basta pushed her roughly forward. 'What's the idea now?' she heard him say, with a curse. 'Why's the damn lantern out again?' A match flared, and Basta's face appeared out of the darkness.

'Visitor for you, Dustfinger,' he announced derisively as he lit the lantern. 'Silvertongue's little girl wants to say goodbye. Her father brought you into this world and his daughter will make sure you leave it again tonight. I wouldn't have let her come, but the Magpie's going soft in her old age. The child actually seems fond of you. It can hardly be your pretty face, can it?' Basta's laugh echoed unpleasantly back from the damp walls.

Meggie went up to the grating behind which Dustfinger stood. She looked at him only briefly, and then gazed over his shoulder. Capricorn's maid was sitting on a stone coffin. The lantern Basta had lit gave only a dim light, but it was enough for Meggie to recognise her face. It was the face from Mo's photograph, except that the hair surrounding it was darker now, and there was no sign of any smile.

As Meggie came closer to the grating her mother lifted her head, and was now looking at her as if nothing else in the world existed.

'Mortola let her come here?' said Dustfinger. 'That's hard to believe.'

'The girl threatened to bite her own tongue.' Basta was still standing on the stairs, playing with the rabbit's foot he wore round his neck as a lucky charm.

'I wanted to say I'm sorry.' Meggie was speaking to Dustfinger, but as she spoke she looked at her mother, who was

still sitting on the stone coffin.

‘What for?’ Dustfinger smiled his strange smile.

‘For what I must do this evening. For reading aloud from the book.’ If only she could have let the two of them know Fenoglio’s plan.

‘Right, now you’ve said your piece!’ barked Basta impatiently. ‘Come on, the air down here could make your voice hoarse.’

But Meggie did not turn. She clung to the bars of the grating as firmly as she could. ‘No,’ she said, ‘I want to stay a bit longer.’ Perhaps she could think of some way to tell them, some apparently innocent remark. ‘I read something else out of a story,’ she told Dustfinger. ‘A tin soldier.’

‘Did you, though?’ Dustfinger was smiling again. It was odd, but this time his smile seemed to her neither mysterious nor supercilious. ‘Well, nothing can go wrong this evening, then, can it?’

He was looking at her thoughtfully, and Meggie tried to tell him with her eyes: We’re going to rescue you. It won’t work out the way Capricorn expects, believe me! Dustfinger was still looking at her, trying to understand. He raised his eyebrows enquiringly, and then turned to Basta.

‘And how’s that fairy, Basta?’ he asked. ‘Still alive, is she, or has your company done for her?’

Meggie saw her mother get up and come towards her, walking tentatively, as if she were treading on broken glass.

‘She’s still alive,’ said Basta sullenly. ‘Tinkling all the time. I can’t get a wink of sleep. If she carries on like that I’m going to tell Flatnose to wring her neck, the way he does the pigeons when they poo on his car.’ Meggie saw her mother take a piece of paper from the pocket of her dress and surreptitiously press it into Dustfinger’s hand.

‘That would mean at least ten years’ bad luck for you both,’ said Dustfinger. ‘Take my word for it – I know about fairies. Oh, watch out, what’s that in front of you?’

Basta leaped back as if something had bitten his toes. Quick as a flash, Dustfinger’s hand came through the grating and gave Meggie the note.

‘Dammit, there’s nothing there!’ swore Basta. ‘Don’t try that again, you hear me?’ He turned just as Meggie’s fingers were closing round the paper. ‘A note, eh? Well, well!’

Meggie tried in vain to keep her hand closed, but it was easy enough for Basta to prise her fingers apart. Then he stared at her mother’s tiny writing.

‘Read it, go on!’ he growled, holding the note in front of her eyes.

Meggie shook her head.

‘Read it!’ Basta’s voice was dangerously low. ‘Or do you want me to carve a pretty pattern on your face like your friend’s here?’

‘Go on, read it, Meggie,’ said Dustfinger. ‘He knows I like a good drop of wine anyway.’

‘Wine?’ Basta laughed. ‘You wanted the child to get you some wine? How did you think she’d do that?’

Meggie stared at the real note. She concentrated on every word until she knew it by heart.

Nine years are a long time. I celebrated all your birthdays. You’re even lovelier than I imagined you.

She heard Basta laughing.

‘Just like you, Dustfinger!’ he said. ‘You think you could drown your fears in drink, but a whole cask of wine wouldn’t be enough for that.’

Dustfinger shrugged his shoulders. ‘It was worth a try.’

Perhaps he looked a little too pleased when he said that, for Basta frowned and looked thoughtfully at his scarred face. 'On the other hand,' he said slowly, 'you always were a crafty dog. And there are rather a lot of letters there just for a bottle of wine. What about it, sweetheart?' He held the note in front of Meggie again. 'Are you going to read it to me now, or shall I show it to the Magpie?'

Meggie snatched the note from him so fast that she had crumpled it behind her back while Basta was still wondering where it had gone.

'Give it here, you little brat!' he hissed at her. 'Give me that note or I'll cut off your fingers.'

But Meggie retreated from him until her back was up against the grating. 'No!' she said, clinging to the bars with one hand and pushing the note through them with the other. Dustfinger caught on at once. She felt him taking the paper from her fingers.

Basta hit her in the face so hard that her head struck the grating. Immediately, a hand stroked her hair, and when she looked round, dazed, she was gazing into her mother's face. He'll notice any moment, she thought, he'll understand it all, but Basta had eyes only for Dustfinger, who was waving the note back and forth behind the grating as if he were brandishing a worm in front of a hungry bird's beak.

'Well, how about it?' enquired Dustfinger, taking a step back. 'Do you dare come in here with me, or would you rather go on hitting little girls?'

Basta stood there motionless, like a child whose ears have suddenly and unexpectedly been boxed. Then he seized Meggie's arm and dragged her towards him. She felt something cold on her throat. She didn't have to see it to know what it was. Her mother screamed and pulled at Dustfinger's hand, but he only held the note higher in the air. 'I knew it!' he said. 'What a coward you are, Basta! You'd rather put a knife to a

child's throat than venture in here. Of course if Flatnose were here to back you up, too, with his broad back and his great fat fists – but he isn't. Come along, you're the one with the knife! I've got nothing but my hands, and you know how I hate to misuse them for fighting.'

Meggie felt Basta's grip relax. The blade was no longer pressing into her skin. She swallowed, and put a hand to her throat. She almost expected to feel warm blood, but there was none. Basta pushed her away so hard that she stumbled and fell on the damp, cold floor. Then he put his hand into his trouser pocket and brought out a bunch of keys. He was panting with rage like a man who had run too far and too fast. Fingers trembling, he put a key into the lock of the cell. Dustfinger watched him, his face impassive. He gestured to Meggie's mother to step back from the grating, and retreated himself, nimble as a dancer. You couldn't tell from his scarred face whether he was afraid or not, but the scars looked darker than usual.

'What's that for?' he said, when Basta came into the cell and held out his knife. 'You might as well put it away. If you kill me you'll spoil Capricorn's fun. He won't forgive you for that in a hurry.'

Yes, he *was* afraid. Meggie could hear it in his voice. The words were spilling out of his mouth a little too fast.

'Who said anything about killing?' growled Basta as he closed the cell door behind him.

Dustfinger retreated as far as the stone coffin. 'Ah, you were thinking of adding a few more decorations to my face?' He was almost whispering. There was something else in his voice now – hatred, scorn, rage. 'Don't expect it to be so easy this time,' he said softly. 'I've learned a few useful tricks since then.'

'Have you indeed?' Basta was standing barely a pace away from him. 'And what may they be? Your friend fire isn't here to help you. You don't even have that stinking marten.'

‘It was words I had in mind.’ Dustfinger placed a hand on the coffin. ‘You see, the fairies have taught me how to lay a curse on someone. They were sorry for my cut face, and they knew how bad I am at fighting. So ... I curse you, Basta – I curse you by the bones of the dead man lying in this coffin. I’ll bet there’s no old priest in it now, but someone you disposed of. Isn’t that right?’

Basta did not answer, but his silence was more eloquent than any words.

‘Of course. An old coffin like this makes a wonderful hiding-place.’ Dustfinger caressed the cracked lid with his fingers as if trying to call the dead back to life with the warmth of his hand. ‘May his spirit haunt you, Basta!’ he said in a solemn voice. ‘May he breathe my name in your ear at every step you take, may he—’

Meggie saw Basta’s hand leap to his rabbit-foot.

‘That thing won’t help you!’ Dustfinger’s hand was still on the coffin. ‘Poor Basta! Are you feeling hot already? Do your limbs begin to tremble?’

Basta lunged at him with the knife, but Dustfinger, light on his feet as he was, avoided the blade. ‘Fire is faster than you, Basta!’ he whispered. ‘Much faster.’

‘Give me the note you handed her!’ Basta screamed in his face.

Dustfinger just put the note in his trouser pocket.

Meggie stood motionless as a doll. Out of the corner of her eye she saw her mother put her hand in the pocket of her dress. When she brought it out again she was holding a stone in it, a grey stone not much bigger than a bird’s egg.

Dustfinger passed his hands over the lid of the coffin, then held them out to Basta. ‘Shall I touch you?’ he asked. ‘What happens when you touch a murdered man’s coffin? Tell me. You know all about such things.’

He took another step aside, like a dancer circling round his partner.

‘I’ll cut your filthy fingers off if you try to touch me!’ yelled Basta, his face red with rage. ‘Every one of them, and your tongue into the bargain.’ He lunged with the knife again, cutting through the air with the bright blade, but Dustfinger avoided it. He was leaping around Basta faster and faster, ducking, retreating, advancing, but suddenly he found that his fearless dance had trapped him. He had only the bare wall behind him now, the grating cut off his retreat to the right – and Basta was coming straight at him.

At that moment Meggie’s mother raised her hand. The stone hit Basta on the head. Astonished, he spun round, looked at her as if trying to remember who she was, and put his hand to his bleeding face. She never knew how Dustfinger did it, but suddenly he had Basta’s knife in his hand. Basta was staring at its familiar blade in amazement, as if he couldn’t grasp the fact that the faithless thing was pointing at his own chest.

‘Well, how’s this, then?’ Dustfinger slowly brought the tip of the knife close to Basta’s stomach. ‘Do you feel how soft your flesh is? The human body is a fragile thing, and you can’t get a new one. What is it you and your friends do to cats and squirrels? Flatnose likes describing it—’

‘I don’t hunt squirrels.’ Basta’s voice cracked. He was trying not to look at the blade, now scarcely a hand’s breadth from his snow-white shirt.

‘No, so you don’t. I remember now. It doesn’t amuse you as much as it does the others.’

Basta’s face was white. All the furious red had ebbed out of it. Fear is not red. Fear is pale as a dead man’s face. ‘What are you going to do now?’ he gasped. He was breathing hard, as if he were drowning. ‘You don’t think you’ll get out of this village alive, do you? They’ll shoot you down before you’re across the square.’

‘Well, I’d prefer that to a meeting with the Shadow,’ replied Dustfinger. ‘Anyway, none of you are very good shots.’

Meggie’s mother came up to him, and mimed writing with her finger in the air. Dustfinger put his hand in his trouser pocket and gave her the note. Basta followed the paper with his eyes as if the strength of his gaze would draw it to him. Resa wrote something on it and handed it back to Dustfinger, who read what she had written, frowning. ‘Wait until dark? No, I won’t wait. But perhaps the girl had better stay here.’ He looked at Meggie. ‘Capricorn won’t harm her. After all, she’s his new Silvertongue, and some time her father will try to rescue her.’ Dustfinger put the note away again and ran the tip of the knife down Basta’s shirt buttons. They clinked as the metal touched them. ‘You go to the stairs, Resa,’ he said. ‘I’ll finish this business off, and then we’ll stroll across Capricorn’s square and walk away like an innocent pair of lovers.’

Cautiously, Resa opened the cell door. She came out past the grating and took Meggie’s hand. Her fingers were cold and rather rough, a stranger’s fingers, but her face was familiar, although it had looked younger and less anxious in the photograph.

‘Resa! We can’t take her with us!’ Dustfinger seized Basta’s arm and forced him back against the wall. ‘Her father will murder me if she gets shot out there. Now, turn round and cover her eyes, unless you want her to watch’ The knife was trembling in his hand. Resa looked at him, horrified, and shook her head vigorously, but Dustfinger acted as if he didn’t see her.

‘You must thrust hard, Dirtyfingers!’ hissed Basta as he pressed his hands against the stone behind him. ‘Killing isn’t easy. You have to practise to do it well.’

‘Nonsense!’ Dustfinger grabbed him by the jacket and held the knife under his chin, the way Basta had pulled his knife on Mo that time in the church. ‘Any fool can kill. It’s easy – as easy

as throwing a book on the fire, breaking down a door, or frightening a child.'

Meggie began to tremble, she didn't know why. Her mother took a step back towards the grating, but when she saw Dustfinger's stony face she stopped. Then she turned, drew Meggie's face against her breast, put her arms round her and held her tight. Her smell seemed familiar to Meggie, like something long forgotten; she closed her eyes and tried not to think of anything, not Dustfinger or the knife or Basta's white face. And then, for a terrible moment, there was only one thing in the world she wanted – to see Basta lying dead on the floor, limp as a doll thrown away, an ugly, stupid toy which always seemed a little scary.

The knife was barely a finger's breadth from Basta's white shirt, but suddenly Dustfinger plunged his hand into Basta's trouser pocket, took out the keys to the cells and stepped back. 'No, you're right, I don't know much about killing,' he said as he made his way backwards out of the cell, 'and I'm not about to learn just for you.'

A scornful smile spread over Basta's face, but Dustfinger paid no attention. He locked the barred door, took Resa's arm and led her to the stairs. 'Let go of her!' he begged, when he saw that she was still holding Meggie tightly. 'Believe me, nothing will happen to her, and we can't take her with us!'

But Resa just shook her head and put her arm round Meggie's shoulders.

'Hey, Dustfinger!' called Basta. 'I knew you couldn't do it. Give me my knife back. You don't know what to do with it anyway!'

Dustfinger ignored him. 'They'll kill you if you stay,' he told Resa, but he let go of her hand.

'Hey, you up there!' bellowed Basta. 'Help! Help! The prisoners are escaping!'

Meggie looked at Dustfinger in alarm. 'Why didn't you gag him?'

'What with, princess?' asked Dustfinger. Resa held Meggie close and stroked her hair.

'They'll shoot you, they'll shoot you!' Basta's voice rang out. 'Hey there! Help!' he shouted again, shaking the bars of the grating.

Footsteps were heard overhead. Dustfinger swore quietly, cast Resa one last glance, then turned and ran up the worn steps. Meggie couldn't hear whether or not he got the door open at the top. She could hear nothing but Basta's shouting, and she ran back towards him, helpless but wanting to strike him through the bars, right in his bellowing face. Once again, she heard footsteps overhead, muffled cries. What were they to do? Someone came crashing down the stairs. Was Dustfinger coming back? No, it wasn't his face but Flatnose's that emerged from the darkness. Another of Capricorn's men was stumbling down the stairs behind him. He looked very young, round-faced and beardless, but he immediately pointed his gun at Meggie and her mother.

'Hello there, Basta! What are you doing behind those bars?' asked Flatnose, surprised.

'Open up, you damn fool!' snapped Basta through the grating. 'Dustfinger's gone.'

'Dustfinger?' Flatnose wiped his face on his sleeve. 'Then the lad here was right. Came to me just now and said he'd seen the fire-eater up there behind a column.'

'And you didn't give chase? Are you really as big a fool as you look?' Basta pressed his face to the bars as if he could make his way through them.

'Hey, watch what you say, right?' Flatnose came up to the grating and studied Basta with obvious pleasure. 'So that dirty-fingered fellow has outwitted you again! Capricorn won't like that.'

‘Send someone after him!’ roared Basta. ‘Or I’ll tell Capricorn it was you who let him go!’

Flatnose took a handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and noisily blew his nose. ‘Oh yes? So who’s behind bars, you or me? He won’t get far. There are two guards in the car park, another three in the square, and his face is easy to recognise, you made good and sure of that, right?’ His laughter sounded like a dog barking. ‘Tell you what, I could really get used to this sight! Your face looks good behind bars. They’re just the thing to stop you waving your knife about under anyone’s nose.’

‘Will you unlock this damn door?’ bellowed Basta. ‘Or I’ll cut off your ugly nose. Open up!’

Flatnose folded his arms. ‘Sadly, I can’t,’ he smirked in a mock-serious voice. ‘Our dirty-fingered friend seems to have taken the keys. Or do *you* see them anywhere?’ he enquired of the boy who was still pointing his gun at Meggie and her mother. When he shook his head, Flatnose grinned all over his squashed-in face. ‘No, he can’t see them either. Well, I suppose I’ll just have to go to Mortola. Maybe she has a master key.’

‘Wipe that grin off your face!’ shouted Basta. ‘Or I’ll carve it off!’

‘You don’t say! I can’t see your knife anywhere. Has Dustfinger stolen another one? If this goes on he’ll soon have a whole collection.’ Flatnose turned his back on Basta and pointed to the cell next to him. ‘Shut the woman in there and guard her till I get back with the keys,’ he said. ‘I’ll just take little Miss Silvertongue back to her room first.’

Meggie resisted as he pulled her away, but Flatnose simply picked her up and threw her over his shoulder. ‘What was the girl doing down here anyway?’ he asked. ‘Does Capricorn know about it?’

‘Ask the Magpie!’ spat Basta.

‘No fear!’ Flatnose muttered as he marched towards the stairs with Meggie. She had time to see the boy push her mother into

the other cell with the barrel of his gun, then she saw only the steps and the floor of the church and the dusty square as Flatnose carried her across it like a sack of potatoes.

‘Let’s hope your voice isn’t as thin as you,’ he grunted as he put her down on her feet outside the room. ‘Or the Shadow will be rather narrow-chested if he really does turn up this evening.’

Meggie did not answer.

When Flatnose unlocked the door, she walked past Fenoglio without a word, climbed up on her bed and buried her head in Mo’s sweater.



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No Luck for Elinor

Having described the precise situation of the office, and accompanied it with copious directions how he was to walk straight up the passage, and when he got into the yard take the door up the steps on the right-hand side, and pull off his hat as he went into the room, Charley Bates bade him hurry on alone, and promised to bide his return on the spot of their parting.

Charles Dickens,
Oliver Twist

Elinor had been driving for more than an hour before she finally reached a town with its own police station. The sea was still some way off, but the hills were lower, and vines covered the slopes rather than the undergrowth and trees that grew on the hills around Capricorn's village. It was terribly hot, even hotter than the day before, and when Elinor got out of the car she heard a distant rumble of thunder that sounded as if a great beast were lurking somewhere beyond the hills. The sky above the houses was a blue as dark as deep water – an ominous blue ...

Don't be silly, Elinor, she told herself as she made for the pale yellow building which was the police station. There's a storm coming, that's all. Not getting as superstitious as that man Basta, are you?

There were two officers in the small police station. They had hung their uniform jackets over their chairs. Despite the big fan whirring round under the ceiling, the air was so muggy it could have been bottled.

The younger of the two men, who was broad and snub-nosed like a pug dog, laughed at Elinor when she told her story, and asked whether she looked so red in the face, perhaps, because she liked the local wine a little too much. Elinor would have tipped him off his chair if his companion hadn't calmed her down. The second officer was a tall, thin man with a melancholy expression and dark hair thinning above his forehead. 'Stop that,' he told the other policeman. 'At least let her finish her story.' He listened unmoved as Elinor told them about Capricorn's village and the Black Jackets, frowned when she started talking about fire-raising and dead roosters, and when she came to Meggie and the planned execution he raised his eyebrows. She said nothing, of course, about the book and just how the execution was to be carried out. Only two weeks ago she wouldn't have believed a word of it herself.

When she had finished, the tall man said nothing for a while. He rearranged the pencils on his desk, tidied some papers, and finally looked at her thoughtfully. 'I've heard about that village before,' he said.

'Naturally, everyone's heard of it!' mocked the other officer. 'The Devil's village, the accursed village, even the snakes avoid it. The walls of the church are painted with blood and Black Jackets, who are really ghosts and carry fire in their pockets, haunt the streets. You only have to get near them and you go up in smoke – whoosh!' He raised his hands and clapped them above his head.

Elinor looked at him icily. His colleague smiled, but then rose with a sigh, laboriously put on his jacket and signed to Elinor to follow him. 'I'm going to take a look at this,' he said over his shoulder.

‘Might as well, if you’ve nothing better to do!’ the other man called after him, laughing so uproariously that Elinor felt like going back to tip him off his chair after all. A little later she was in the passenger seat of a police car, and the road along which she had come was winding its way through the hills. Why on earth, she kept thinking, didn’t I do this before? Everything will be all right now, everything. No one will be shot or executed, Meggie will get her father back and Mortimer will be reunited with his daughter. Yes, everything will be all right, thanks to Elinor! She could have sung and danced (not that she was much of a dancer, and she was sitting in a car). She had never in her life felt so pleased with herself. Now who could say she didn’t know how to cope with the real world?

The policeman beside her said nothing. He just kept his eyes on the road, taking bend after bend at a speed that made Elinor’s heart beat painfully fast. Occasionally, he absent-mindedly kneaded his right earlobe. He seemed to know the way, and never hesitated when the road branched or passed any turning. Elinor could not help thinking how long it had taken her and Mo to search for the village. Suddenly a disturbing thought came into her mind.

‘There are quite a lot of them,’ she said in an uncertain voice, just as they were taking another bend so fast that they came alarmingly close to the abyss yawning on her left. ‘I mean, this Capricorn has rather a lot of men. And they’re armed, even if they’re not particularly good shots. Might it be a good idea to ask for reinforcements?’ That was what people did in stupid films about cops and robbers – the police were always asking for reinforcements.

The policeman here with her ran his hand through his sparse hair and nodded as if he had already thought of that. ‘Yes, of course,’ he said, reaching for his radio. ‘Reinforcements won’t hurt, but they’d better keep in the background. The first thing is to ask a few questions.’

Over the radio, he asked for five men. Not many against Capricorn's Black Jackets, thought Elinor, but better than nothing, certainly better than a desperate father, a boy, and an overweight book collector.

'There it is!' she said as Capricorn's village appeared in the distance, grey and insignificant-looking amidst all the dark green.

'Yes, that's what I thought,' replied the policeman, after which he was silent again. When he just nodded to the guard in the car park Elinor simply refused to believe the worst. Only when they were standing in front of Capricorn, and he was handing her over like lost property being restored to its rightful owner, was she forced to admit to herself that nothing was going to turn out well after all. Everything was ruined now – and oh, how stupid she had been, how dreadfully stupid.

'She's spreading slander about you,' he heard the policeman tell Capricorn, avoiding Elinor's eyes. 'Something about child abduction. And there was talk of fire-raising ...'

'All nonsense!' replied Capricorn, answering the unspoken question in a bored voice. 'I love children – as long as they don't come too close to me. Children and business don't mix.'

The policeman nodded, and looked unhappily at his hands. 'And she said something about an execution ...'

'Did she indeed?' Capricorn looked Elinor up and down as if amazed by such fantasies. 'Well, as you know, I have no call for anything of that nature. People do as I say without my having to resort to such drastic measures.'

'Of course,' murmured the policeman, nodding. 'Of course.'

He couldn't wait to leave. As his rapid, clipped footsteps died away Cockerell, who had been sitting on the steps, laughed. 'He has three small children, right? It ought to be compulsory for all policemen to have small children. That one was a pushover! Basta just had to stand outside the school twice. What about it – should we pay him another visit, to refresh his memory?'

Capricorn shook his head. 'I don't think that will be necessary. Let's just think what to do with our guest here. How should we deal with someone who tells such shocking lies about us?'

Elinor felt weak at the knees as he turned his colourless eyes on her. If Mortimer offered to read me into some book now, any book, she thought, I'd accept. I wouldn't even want to pick and choose.

Three or four black-clad men were standing behind her, so trying to run away was pointless. All you can do is submit to your fate with dignity, Elinor, she told herself. But reading about such a thing was much easier than doing it.

'The crypt or the sheds?' asked Cockerell, strolling up to her. The *crypt*, thought Elinor. Dustfinger said something about that. And it was nothing nice.

'The crypt? Why not? We have to dispose of her, or who might she bring here next?' Capricorn hid a yawn behind his hand. 'Very well, we'll give the Shadow a little more work to do this evening. He'll like that.'

Elinor wanted to say something – something bold and heroic – but her tongue wouldn't work. It just lay there in her mouth, numb. Cockerell had already hauled her as far as that ridiculous statue when Capricorn called him back.

'I quite forgot to ask her about Silvertongue!' he cried. 'Ask her if she happens to know where he is at the moment.'

'Well, come on, out with it!' growled Cockerell, seizing her by the nape of the neck as if to shake the answer out of her. 'Where is he?'

Elinor tightened her lips. Quick, Elinor, quick, she told herself, think of a good answer. And suddenly her tongue was working again.

'Why ask me?' she said to Capricorn, who was still sitting in his chair as pale as if he had been left in the wash too long, or

the sun burning down out in the square had bleached him. 'You should know! He's dead. Your men shot him – and the boy.' Look at him, Elinor, she thought. Look him straight in the face the way you used to look at your father when he caught you with the wrong book. A few tears would come in useful too. Go on, just think of your books, all your burnt books! Think of last night, the fear, the despair – and if none of that works pinch yourself!

Capricorn was gazing at her thoughtfully.

'There!' Cockerell called to him. 'I knew we'd hit him!'

Elinor was still looking at Capricorn, a blurred sight through the veil of her false tears.

'We'll see,' he said slowly. 'My men are searching the hills for an escaped prisoner. I don't suppose you're going to tell me where they should look for the two bodies?'

'I buried them, and I'm certainly not saying where.' Elinor felt a tear running down her nose. By all the letters of the alphabet, Elinor, she told herself, there's a great actress lost in you!

'Buried them. Well, well.' Capricorn played with the rings on his left hand. He was wearing three at once, and he adjusted them, frowning, as if they had got out of line without his permission.

'That's why I went to the police,' said Elinor. 'To avenge them. And my books.'

Cockerell laughed. 'You didn't have to bury those books, right? They burned beautifully, like the very best firewood, and their pages – ah, they quivered like pale little fingers.' He raised his hands and imitated the movement. Elinor hit him in the face with all her might, and she was quite strong. Blood flowed from Cockerell's nose. He wiped it away with his hand, and looked at it as if he were surprised to see something so red coming out of him. 'Look at that!' he said, showing Capricorn his bloodstained

fingers. 'You wait, she'll give the Shadow more trouble than Basta.'

When he led her away Elinor walked beside him with her head held high. Only when she saw the steep stairway disappearing into a bottomless black hole did her courage forsake her for a moment. The crypt, of course, now she remembered – the place where they put the condemned. That was what it smelled like, anyway, damp and mouldy, just as one imagines the odour of death.

At first Elinor couldn't believe her eyes when she saw Basta's wiry figure pressed up against the iron bars. She had thought she must have misheard Cockerell's last remark, but sure enough, there was Basta shut up in the cage like an animal, with all the fear and hopelessness of a trapped beast in his eyes. Even the sight of Elinor did not cheer him. He looked straight through her and Cockerell, as if they were two of the ghosts he feared so much.

'What's *he* doing here?' asked Elinor. 'Have you taken to locking each other up now?'

Cockerell shrugged. 'Shall I tell her?' he asked Basta, who responded with nothing but the same glazed stare. 'First he let Silvertongue escape, and now Dustfinger. That's a sure way to ruin your chances with the boss, even if you do think you're his personal pet. And of course it's years since you managed to light a decent fire.' He smiled maliciously at Basta.

Signora Loredan, it's time to think about making a will, Elinor told herself as Cockerell pushed her further into the crypt. If Capricorn intends to kill his most faithful dog, he's certainly not going to stop short at you.

'Hey, you might look a bit more cheerful!' Cockerell told Basta as he fished a bunch of keys out of his jacket pocket. 'You've got two women for company now!'

Basta pressed his forehead against the grating. 'Haven't you caught the fire-eater yet?' he croaked. His voice sounded as if

he had shouted himself hoarse.

‘No, but the fat woman here says we did hit Silvertongue. Says he’s dead as a doornail. Sounds like I winged him after all. Well, I have had plenty of practice on the cats.’

Behind the door with the grating that Cockerell unlocked for her something moved. A woman was sitting there in the dark, leaning back against something that looked suspiciously like a stone coffin. Elinor could not see the woman’s face, but then the figure straightened up.

‘Company for you, Resa!’ called Cockerell as he pushed Elinor through the open door. ‘You two can have a nice chat!’

He was laughing uproariously as he trudged away.

As for Elinor, she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She would rather have seen her favourite niece again anywhere but here.



51

A Narrow Escape

‘I don’t know what it is,’ answered Fiver wretchedly. ‘There isn’t any danger here, at this moment. But it’s coming – it’s coming.’

**Richard Adams,
*Watership Down***

Farid heard footsteps just as they were making the torches. The torches had to be larger and more solid than those Dustfinger used in his shows, for they would have to burn a long time. Farid had already cut Silvertongue’s hair with the knife Dustfinger had given him. It was short and bristly now, and at least that made Silvertongue look slightly different. Farid had also shown him the kind of earth he needed to rub on his face to darken his skin. No one must recognise them, not this time—but then he heard the footsteps.

And voices: one was speaking angrily, the other laughed and called out. But they were still too far away for him to make out the words.

Silvertongue picked up the torches, and Gwin snapped at Farid’s fingers as the boy pushed him roughly into the rucksack. ‘Where can we hide, Farid? Where?’ whispered Silvertongue.

‘I know a place.’ Farid threw the rucksack over his shoulder and led Silvertongue over to the charred wall. He climbed over the blackened stones where there had once been a window,

jumped down in the dry grass behind the wall, and crouched low. The metal cover he now pushed aside had buckled in the fire and was overgrown by alyssum. Its tiny white flowers rambled like snow over the opening. Farid had found the metal plate while he was exploring during the long hours he spent here with the silent and ever-reserved Dustfinger. He had jumped off the wall and noticed the hollow sound. Perhaps the space under it had originally been a store for perishable foodstuffs, but at least once before it had also been used as a hiding-place.

Silvertongue recoiled when he touched the skeleton in the darkness. It looked small, scarcely big enough for an adult, and it lay there in the cramped, underground space quite peacefully, curled up as if it had lain down to sleep. Perhaps it was because it looked so peaceful that Farid was not afraid of it. If there was a ghost down here, he felt sure, it could be only a sad, pale creature, nothing to be frightened of.

There wasn't much space when Farid drew the metal cover across again. Silvertongue was tall, almost too tall to hide here, but it was reassuring to have him close, even if his heart was beating just as fast as Farid's own. The boy could feel every single beat of it as they crouched there side by side, listening for sounds from above.

The voices were coming closer, but it was difficult to make them out, for the ground muffled them as if they came from another world. Once a foot stepped on the metal cover, and Farid dug his fingers into Silvertongue's arm and wouldn't let him go until all was quiet again overhead. It was a long time before they dared trust the silence, such a very long time that once or twice Farid turned his head because he imagined that the skeleton had moved.

When Silvertongue cautiously raised the metal cover and looked out it did seem as if they really had gone. Only the grasshoppers were chirping tirelessly, and a bird, startled, flew up from the charred wall.

Whoever it was had taken everything with them: the blankets, the sweater that Farid had curled up in at night like a snail going into its shell, even the bloodstained bandages that Silvertongue had tied round the boy's forehead the night they'd been shot at.

'Never mind,' said Silvertongue, as they stood beside their cold fireplace. 'We shan't be needing our blankets tonight.' Then he ran his fingers through Farid's dark hair. 'What would I do without you, master scout, rabbit-catcher, finder of hiding-places?' he asked.

Farid stared at his bare toes and smiled.



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A Fragile Little Thing

When she expressed a doubtful hope that Tinker Bell would be glad to see her, he said, 'Who is Tinker Bell?'

'O Peter,' she said, shocked; but even when she explained he could not remember.

'There are such a lot of them,' he said. 'I expect she is no more.'

I expect he was right, for fairies don't live long, but they are so little that a short time seems a good while to them.

J.M. Barrie,
Peter Pan

Capricorn's men were looking for Dustfinger in the wrong place. He hadn't left the village. He hadn't even tried. Dustfinger was in Basta's house.

It was in an alley just behind Capricorn's yard, surrounded by empty houses inhabited only by cats and rats. Basta did not want neighbours. Indeed, he wanted no other company but Capricorn's. Dustfinger knew Basta would have slept on the threshold of Capricorn's room if he had been allowed to, but none of the men lived in the main house. They stood guard there, that was all. They ate in the church and slept in one or other of the many abandoned houses in the village, that was the

rule and it could not be broken. Most of the men kept moving round, living in one house and going on to another when the roof began to leak. Only Basta had lived in the same place ever since they came to the village. Dustfinger suspected he had chosen that house because St John's wort grew beside the door, and there is no other plant with such a reputation for keeping away evil – leaving aside the evil in Basta's own heart.

Like most of the buildings in the village the house was built of grey stone, with black-painted shutters that Basta usually kept closed and on which he had painted the signs he believed would keep bad luck away, just like the yellow flowers of St John's wort. Sometimes Dustfinger thought Basta's constant fear of curses and sudden disaster probably arose from his terror of the darkness within himself, which made him assume that the rest of the world must be exactly the same.

Dustfinger had been lucky to make it as far as Basta's house. He had run into a whole crowd of Capricorn's men almost as soon as he stumbled out of the church. Of course they had recognised him instantly, Basta had long ago made that a certainty. But their surprise had given Dustfinger just enough time to disappear down one of the alleys. Fortunately, he knew every nook and cranny of this accursed village. He had meant to make for the car park and go on into the hills, but then he'd thought of Basta's empty house. He had forced his way through holes in walls, crawled through cellars, and ducked down behind the parapets of balconies that were no longer used. When it came to hiding, even Gwin had nothing to teach Dustfinger. A strange sense of curiosity had always driven him to explore the hidden, forgotten corners of this and any other place, and all that knowledge had now come in useful.

He was out of breath when he finally reached Basta's house. Basta was probably the only man in Capricorn's village who locked his front door, but the lock was no great obstacle to Dustfinger. He let himself in and hid in the attic until his heart

had slowed down, even though the wooden planks were so rotten that he feared he would go through the floor at every step. Downstairs, he found enough food in Basta's kitchen to quell the hunger that had been gnawing like a worm at the walls of his stomach. Neither he nor Resa had been given anything to eat since they were put in those nets, so it was doubly satisfying to fill his belly with Basta's food.

When he had partially satisfied his hunger he opened one of the shutters just a crack, so that he could have warning in good time of any approaching footsteps, but the only sound that met his ears was a tinkling, so faint that he could hardly hear it. Only then did he remember the fairy that Meggie had read into this world that normally had no fairies.

He found her in Basta's bedroom. The room contained nothing but a bed and a chest of drawers on which a number of bricks lay carefully arranged side by side, all of them covered with soot. They said in the village that whenever Capricorn had a house set on fire Basta took away a brick or stone, even though he feared fire at other times, and clearly that story was true. On one of the bricks stood a glass jug with a faint light coming from it, not much brighter than a glow-worm would have made. The fairy was lying at the bottom of the glass, crumpled up like a butterfly just out of the cocoon. Basta had put a plate over the top of the jug, but the fragile little thing didn't look as if she had the strength to fly.

When Dustfinger took the plate away the fairy didn't even raise her head. Dustfinger put his hand into her glass prison and carefully took the little creature out. Her limbs were so delicate he was afraid his fingers would break them. The fairies he knew had looked different, smaller but stronger, with fair blue skin and four shimmering wings. This one had skin the same colour as a human, a very pale human, and her wings were more like butterfly than dragonfly wings. But would she like the same things to eat as the fairies he knew? It was worth a try. She looked half dead.

Dustfinger took the pillow off Basta's bed and put it on the kitchen table, which was scrubbed clean. (Everything in Basta's house was scrubbed clean, as spotless as his snow-white shirt.) He laid the fairy on the pillow, then filled a dish with milk and put it on the table beside her. She immediately opened her eyes – so in having a good sense of smell and a taste for milk she seemed no different from the fairies he knew. He dipped his finger in the milk and let a white drop fall on her lips. She licked it up like a hungry little cat. Dustfinger trickled drop after drop into her mouth until she sat up and feebly beat her wings. Her face had a little colour in it now, but although he spoke three fairy languages he understood not a word of what she finally said in her faint tinkling voice.

‘What a pity!’ he whispered, as she spread her wings and flew, rather unsteadily, up to the ceiling. ‘That means I can't ask you if you could make me invisible, or so small that you could carry me to Capricorn's festivities.’

The fairy looked down at him, tinkled something that he couldn't understand, and settled on the side of the kitchen cupboard.

Dustfinger sat down on the only chair by Basta's kitchen table and looked up at her. ‘All the same,’ he said, ‘it's good to see someone like you again. If only the fire in this world had more of a sense of humour, and a troll or a glass man would look out of the trees now and then – well, perhaps I could get used to the rest of it after all, the noise, the speed, the crowds – and the way the nights are so much lighter ...’

He sat there in his worst enemy's kitchen for quite a long time, watching the fairy flying round the room investigating everything, for fairies are naturally inquisitive, and this one was obviously no exception. Every now and then she stopped to sip her milk, and he filled the dish a second time. Once or twice, footsteps approached, but each time they passed by the house. What a good thing Basta had no friends. The air that came in through the window was sultry; it made Dustfinger drowsy. The

narrow strip of sky showing above the houses would stay light for many hours yet – long enough for him to make up his mind whether or not to go to Capricorn's festivities.

Why should he go? He could get hold of the book later, some time when all the excitement in the village had died down and everything was back to normal. And what about Resa? What was going to happen to her? The Shadow would come for her. There was nothing to be done about that, not by anyone, not even Silvertongue if he were really so mad as to try. But Silvertongue didn't know about her, or about his daughter, and at least there was no need to worry about Meggie – not now that she was Capricorn's favourite toy. Capricorn wouldn't let the Shadow hurt *her*.

No, I won't go, thought Dustfinger, I'll hide here for a while. Tomorrow, there'll be no more Basta, that's one good thing. And perhaps I shall go away from here, go away for ever ... No. He knew he wouldn't do that. Not while the book was here.

The fairy had flown over to the window, and was peering curiously out at the alley.

'Forget it. Stay here,' said Dustfinger. 'Please. Believe me, it's no place for you out there.'

She looked at him quizzically, then folded her wings and knelt on the windowsill. And there she stayed, as if she couldn't decide between the hot room and the strange freedom on offer outside.



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53

The Right Words

This was the shocking thing; that the slime of the pit seemed to utter cries and voices; that the amorphous dust gesticulated and sinned; that what was dead, and had no shape, should usurp the offices of life.

Robert Louis Stevenson,
The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde

Fenoglio wrote and wrote, but the number of pages he had hidden under the mattress was no greater. He kept taking them out, fiddling with them, tearing up one and adding another. ‘No, no, no!’ Meggie heard him muttering crossly to himself. ‘No, that’s not it yet.’

‘It will be dark in a few hours,’ she said at last, anxiously. ‘Suppose you don’t finish it in time?’

‘I have finished!’ he snapped, irritated. ‘I’ve finished a dozen times already, but I’m not happy with it.’ He lowered his voice to a whisper before he went on. ‘There are so many questions. Suppose the Shadow turns on you or me or the prisoners once he’s killed Capricorn? And is killing Capricorn really the only solution? What’s going to happen to his men afterwards? What do I do with them?’

‘What do you think? The Shadow must kill them all!’ Meggie whispered back. ‘How else are we ever going to get home or rescue my mother?’

Fenoglio did not like this reply. 'Good heavens, what a heartless creature you are!' he whispered. 'Kill them all! Haven't you seen how young some of them are?' He shook his head. 'No! I'm not a mass murderer, I'm a writer! I'm sure I can think of some less bloodthirsty ending.' And he began writing again ... and crossing words out ... and writing more, while outside the sun sank lower and lower until its rays were gilding the hilltops.

Every time steps came along the corridor Fenoglio hid what he had been writing under his mattress, but no one came in to see what the old man kept scribbling on his blank sheets of paper. For Basta was down in the crypt.

The bored guards on duty outside their door had several visitors that afternoon. Men had obviously come into the village from Capricorn's outposts to watch the execution. Putting her ear to the door, Meggie eavesdropped on their conversations. They laughed a lot, and their voices sounded excited. They were all looking forward to the night's spectacle. Not one of them seemed to feel sorry for Basta. Far from it. Knowing Capricorn's former favourite was to die that night just seemed to add to their fun. Of course they discussed Meggie too. That little witch, they called her, that little madam the enchantress, and not all of them seemed to be convinced of her powers.

As for Basta's executioner, Meggie learned no more than what Fenoglio had already told her and what she remembered of the passage that the Magpie had made her read. It wasn't much, but she heard the fear in those voices outside the door, and the horrified awe that overcame them all at the mention of his name, which was not a real name at all. Only those who, like Capricorn himself, had come out of Fenoglio's book had ever seen the Shadow – but they had all obviously heard about him – and they painted pictures in the darkest tones of the way he would deal with the prisoners. There were evidently several opinions about how he actually killed his victims, but the suggestions Meggie overheard grew more and more horrible the

closer evening came, until she could bear it no longer. She went to sit by the window with her hands over her ears.

It was six o'clock – the church clock was just beginning to strike – when Fenoglio suddenly put down his pen and looked over what he had written with a satisfied expression. 'Got it!' he whispered. 'Yes, that's it. That's how it will be. It will turn out splendidly.' Impatiently, he beckoned Meggie over and gave her the paper.

'Read it!' he whispered, glancing nervously at the door. Out in the corridor, Flatnose was just boasting of the way he had poisoned a farmer's stocks of olive oil.

'Is that all?' Meggie looked incredulously at the single sheet of paper.

'Yes, that's all. No more is needed. As you'll see. The words just have to be the right ones. Go on, read it!'

Meggie did as he said.

The men outside were laughing, and she found it difficult to concentrate on Fenoglio's words. Finally, she did it. But she had no sooner finished the first sentence than the men outside fell utterly silent. The Magpie's voice echoed down the corridor. 'What's all this? A coffee morning?'

Fenoglio hastily took the precious paper and put it under his mattress. He was just readjusting the bedspread when the Magpie opened the door.

'Your supper,' she told Meggie, putting a steaming plate down on the table.

'What about me?' enquired Fenoglio in a deliberately cheerful voice. The mattress had slipped slightly when he hid the paper under it, and he had to lean against his bed to hide it from Mortola, but luckily she had no eyes for him. Meggie felt sure she thought he was merely a liar, and very likely it annoyed her that Capricorn did not agree with her.

‘Eat it all up!’ she ordered Meggie. ‘And then get changed. Your clothes look dreadful, and stiff with dirt too.’ She signalled to the maid who had come with her, a young girl at most only four or five years older than Meggie herself. The rumours of Meggie’s supposed powers of witchcraft had obviously reached this girl’s ears too. A snow-white dress was draped over her arm, and she avoided looking at Meggie as she made her way past her to hang it in the wardrobe.

‘I don’t want that dress!’ Meggie spat at the Magpie. ‘I want to wear this.’ She took Mo’s sweater off her bed, but Mortola snatched it from her hands.

‘Nonsense. Do you want Capricorn to think we’ve been keeping you in a sack? You’ll wear that dress. Either you put it on yourself or we’ll put it on you. I shall come for you as soon as darkness falls. Wash your face and comb your hair. You look like a stray cat.’

The maid scurried past Meggie again, looking as frightened as if any contact might burn her. The Magpie impatiently pushed the girl out into the corridor.

‘Lock the door,’ she told Flatnose. ‘And send your friends away. You’re supposed to be on guard.’

Flatnose strolled casually towards the door. Meggie saw him make a face at the Magpie behind her back before he closed it.

She went over to the dress and touched the white material. ‘White!’ she murmured. ‘I don’t like white things. Death has white hounds. Mo once told me a story about them.’

‘Ah yes, the white, red-eyed hounds of Death.’ Fenoglio came over to her. ‘Ghosts are white too, and the thirst of the ancient gods for blood was quenched only by white sacrificial animals, as if the gods liked the taste of innocence best. Oh no, no!’ he added quickly, seeing Meggie’s terrified eyes. ‘No, believe me, Capricorn certainly wasn’t thinking of any such thing when he sent you that dress. How would he know such stories? White is the colour of the beginning too, and of the end. And,’ he added,

lowering his voice, 'remember, both you and I, Meggie, are going to make sure it is Capricorn's end and not ours.' Gently, he led Meggie to the table and made her sit down. The smell of roast meat rose to her nostrils.

'What do you think it is?' she asked.

'Looks like veal. Why?'

Meggie pushed the plate away. 'I'm not hungry,' she murmured.

Fenoglio looked at her with great sympathy. 'You know, Meggie,' he said, 'I think I ought to write a story about you next, you and how you save us all with your voice. It would be a very exciting story.'

'But would it have a happy ending?' Meggie looked out of the window. Only another hour, two at the most, and it would be dark. Suppose Mo came then? Suppose he made another attempt to free her? He didn't know what she and Fenoglio were planning. Suppose they shot at him again? Suppose they really did hit him last time? Meggie put her arms on the table and buried her face in them.

She felt Fenoglio stroking her hair. 'It will be all right, Meggie!' he whispered. 'Believe me, my stories always have happy endings. If I want them to.'

'That dress has very tight sleeves!' she whispered. 'How am I to hide the paper in my sleeve without the Magpie noticing?'

'I'll distract her attention. Don't worry.'

'But later? They'll all see me take the paper out.'

'Nonsense, you'll manage.' Fenoglio put a hand under her chin. 'It will be all right, Meggie!' he said again, wiping a tear off her cheek with his forefinger. 'You're not alone, even if you may feel you are tonight. I'm here, and Dustfinger is somewhere out there. I know him as well as I know myself, and I can assure you he'll come, if only to see the book and perhaps get it back – and then there's your father, and that boy who was

looking at you in such a lovesick way back in the square in front of the memorial when I first saw Dustfinger.'

'Oh, stop it!' Meggie dug her elbow into his stomach, but she had to laugh, even though her tears were still blurring everything, the table, her hands, Fenoglio's wrinkled face. She felt as if she had used up enough tears for a whole lifetime in these last few weeks.

'Why? He's a good-looking lad. I'd put in a good word for him with your father like a shot.'

'I said stop it!'

'Only if you'll eat something.' Fenoglio pushed the plate back towards her. 'And that lady, your friend, what was her name?'

'Elinor.' Meggie put an olive in her mouth and chewed it until she could feel the stone between her teeth.

'Exactly. Perhaps she's out there too, with your father. Good Lord, when I come to think of it we're almost in the majority.'

Meggie almost choked on the olive stone. Fenoglio smiled, pleased with himself. Mo always raised his eyebrows when he had managed to make her laugh, looking both surprised and serious as if he had no idea what she was laughing at. Meggie could see his face before her so clearly that she might almost have reached out to touch it.

'You'll soon see your father again!' whispered Fenoglio. 'And then you can tell him how you found your mother along the way and rescued her from Capricorn. That's quite something, don't you think?'

Meggie just nodded.

The dress felt scratchy on her throat and arms. It was more like a dress for a grown-up than a child, and it was rather too big for Meggie. When she took a few steps in it she trod on the hem. The sleeves fitted tightly, but she had no difficulty in pushing the sheet of paper up inside one of them; it was as thin as a dragonfly's leg. She practised a couple of times – pushing it

in, pulling it out. Finally, she left it up her sleeve. It crackled slightly when she moved her hands or raised that arm.

The moon hung pale in the sky above the church tower, and the night wore a veil of moonlight when the Magpie came back to fetch Meggie.

‘You haven’t combed your hair!’ she said crossly. This time she had another maid with her, a stocky woman with a red face and red hands who was obviously not afraid of Meggie’s powers of witchcraft. She pulled the comb so brutally through Meggie’s hair that she almost cried out.

‘Shoes!’ said the Magpie, seeing Meggie’s bare toes peep out from under the hem of the dress. ‘Didn’t anyone think of shoes?’

‘She could put those on.’ The maid pointed to Meggie’s worn-out trainers. ‘The dress is long enough, no one will see them. Anyway, don’t witches always go barefoot?’

The Magpie gave her such a look that her voice died on her lips.

‘Exactly!’ cried Fenoglio, who had been watching the two women get Meggie ready, with an ironic expression on his face. ‘That’s what they do, they always go barefoot. Do I have to change for this festive occasion too? What does one wear to attend an execution? I imagine I shall be sitting beside Capricorn?’

The Magpie stuck her chin out. It was a small, soft chin and looked as if it came from another, gentler face.

‘You can stay as you are,’ she said, putting a slide set with pearls in Meggie’s hair. ‘Prisoners don’t have to change.’ The mockery dripped from her voice like poison.

‘What do you mean, prisoners?’ Fenoglio pushed his chair back.

‘I mean *prisoners*, what else?’ The Magpie stepped back and looked critically at Meggie. ‘That will have to do,’ she said. ‘It’s

odd, but with her hair back she reminds me of someone.' Meggie quickly lowered her head, and before the Magpie could give this observation more thought Fenoglio diverted her attention.

'But I am no ordinary prisoner, madam, let's get that quite clear!' he roared. 'Without me none of this would exist at all, your own less than delightful self included.'

The Magpie cast him a final contemptuous glance and took hold of Meggie's arm, luckily not the one with Fenoglio's precious words inside its sleeve. 'The guard will come for you when it's time,' she said to Fenoglio, leading Meggie to the door.

'Remember what your father told you!' called Fenoglio when Meggie was out in the passage. 'Words don't come to life until you can taste them on your tongue.'

The Magpie nudged Meggie in the back. 'Get moving!' she said, and closed the door behind them.



54

Fire

‘And then – I have it!’ said Bagheera, leaping up. ‘Go thou down quickly to the men’s huts in the valley, and take some of the Red Flower which they grow there, so that when the time comes thou mayest have even a stronger friend than I or Baloo or those of the Pack that love thee. Get the Red Flower.’

By Red Flower Bagheera meant fire, only no creature in the jungle will call fire by its proper name. Every beast lives in deadly fear of it.

Rudyard Kipling,
The Jungle Book

They set out when dusk fell over the hills, leaving Gwin at their camp. After what had happened on their last night-time visit to Capricorn’s village, even Farid could see it was better that way. Silvertongue made him go first. He knew nothing of the boy’s fear of ghosts and other nocturnal terrors. Farid had hidden it from him more successfully than he had from Dustfinger. Silvertongue did not mock his fear of the dark either, as Dustfinger had, and curiously enough that made the fear less, shrinking it as only daylight usually did. But now Farid was going to use something else that Dustfinger thought him too foolhardy to handle.

Fire. They had decided to start a fire next to Capricorn’s house, so that it would not spread to the hills so fast but would

threaten the only thing Capricorn cared about: his treasure chambers.

This time, the village was not quiet and empty as it had been on the previous nights, but was buzzing like a wasps' nest. Four armed guards were patrolling the car park, and cars were parked all round the wire-netting fence that surrounded the former football field. Their headlights bathed the area in glaring light, as if a bright cloth had been spread out in the dark.

'So that's where the show's to take place,' whispered Silvertongue as they approached the houses. 'Poor Meggie.'

A kind of rostrum had been set up in the middle of this arena with a cage opposite it, perhaps for the monster that Silvertongue's daughter was to read out of the book, perhaps for the prisoners. On the left-hand side of the field, facing away from the wire fence and the village, stood long wooden benches. A few of the Black Jackets were already sitting on them, like ravens that had found a bright, warm place to spend the night.

They had thought of stealing into the village from the car park. With so many strangers around, perhaps no one would notice them. But then they decided on a longer, darker route. Farid went ahead again, using every tree as cover, always keeping uphill from the houses until they were above the uninhabited part of the village that looked as if a giant had trodden on it. Even there, more guards than usual were patrolling. They had to keep retreating into the shadows of a gateway, ducking down behind a wall, or climbing through a window and waiting with bated breath for the guard to pass by. Luckily there were many dark corners in Capricorn's village, and the guards strolled through the alleys with an air of boredom, as men do when they are sure there is no threat of danger.

Farid had Dustfinger's rucksack with him, containing all they would need to kindle a quick, hot fire. Silvertongue carried the wood they had collected, in case the flames did not find enough to feed on among the stones. And there were Capricorn's stocks of petrol too. Farid still had the smell of it in his nostrils from the night when they had shut him up in the sheds. The tanks were seldom guarded, but they might not need them. It was a windless night; the flames would burn quietly and steadily. Farid remembered Dustfinger's warning: 'Never light a fire when it's windy. The wind will catch hold of it and it will forget you, it will fan the flames until they leap up and bite you and lick the skin from your bones.' But the wind was sleeping tonight, and still air filled the alleyways, like warm water in a bucket.

They had hoped to find the square outside Capricorn's house empty, but as they were about to enter it from one of the alleys they saw half a dozen men standing outside the church.

'Why are they still here?' whispered Farid, as Silvertongue drew him into the shadow of a doorway. 'The festivities are about to begin.'

Two maids came out of Capricorn's house, each with a pile of plates. They were taking them to the church. Obviously the successful execution was to be celebrated there later. When the maids passed the guards the men whistled at them. One of the women almost dropped the crockery when one of them tried to lift her skirt with the barrel of his gun. It was the man who had recognised Silvertongue when they slipped into the village the night before. Farid touched his forehead, which was still bloodstained, and cursed him with the worst curses he knew. Why did *he* have to be the one there? But even if they got past him unrecognised, how were they going to start a fire while the others were still standing around?

'Take it easy!' Silvertongue whispered to him. 'They'll soon go away. The first thing we have to do is make sure Meggie really has left the house.'

Farid nodded, looking at the big house. There were still lights on in two of the windows, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. 'I'll sneak down to the football field and see if she's there,' he whispered to Silvertongue. Perhaps they had already fetched Dustfinger from the church, perhaps he was in the cage they had set up, and he could whisper to him that they had brought his best friend, fire, to save him.

Night shadows filled many of the nooks and crannies among the houses, despite the brightness of the street lights. Farid was about to set off, using their shelter, when the door of Capricorn's house opened. The old woman with a face like a vulture came out. She was dragging Silvertongue's daughter along behind her. Farid hardly recognised Meggie in the long white dress she wore. After them, gun in hand, came the man who had shot at him and Silvertongue. He looked round, took a bunch of keys from his pocket, locked the door, and beckoned to one of the men standing outside the church. He was obviously telling him to guard the house. So only one man would stay on guard when the others went off to see the show.

Farid felt Silvertongue tensing every muscle – as if he wanted to run to his daughter, who looked almost as pale as her dress. The boy clutched his arm in a warning gesture, but Silvertongue seemed to have forgotten him. He had eyes only for the girl. One reckless step and he would be out of the shelter of the shadows.

'Don't!' Farid pulled him back in alarm – as best he could, for he scarcely came up to Silvertongue's shoulder. Luckily, Capricorn's men were watching the old woman as she crossed the square, walking so fast the girl stumbled over the hem of her dress a couple of times.

'She looks so pale!' whispered Silvertongue. 'Heavens, do you see how frightened she is? Perhaps she'll look this way, perhaps we can give her a signal—'

‘No!’ Farid was still hanging on to him with both hands. ‘We must start the fire. That’s the only way we can help her. Please, Silvertongue – they’ll see you!’

‘Don’t keep calling me Silvertongue. It gets on my nerves.’

The old woman disappeared among the houses with Meggie. Flatnose was following them, lumbering like a bear in a black suit, and at last the other men left too. They went down the street, laughing, looking forward to what the night promised them: death spiced with fear, and the appearance of a new terror in this accursed village.

Only the guard outside Capricorn’s house was left. He watched the others go, his face gloomy as he kicked an empty cigarette packet and struck the wall with his fist. He was the only one who was going to miss the fun. Even the guard at the top of the church tower could at least watch the show from a distance.

They had expected a guard to be posted outside the house. Farid had explained the best way to get rid of him, and Silvertongue had nodded and agreed to the plan. When the footsteps of Capricorn’s men had died away and they could hear nothing but the noise from the direction of the car park, they moved out of the shadows, acting as if they had only just emerged from the alley, and openly approached the guard side by side. He looked at them suspiciously, pushed himself away from the wall against which he had been leaning, and took the gun from his shoulder. Alarmed, Farid involuntarily put his hand to his forehead, but at least the guard was not one of the men who might have recognised them, not the man with the limp, or Basta, or any of Capricorn’s other personal henchmen.

‘Hey, lend us a hand!’ called Silvertongue, ignoring the gun. ‘Those fools forgot Capricorn’s armchair. We’ve been sent to fetch it.’

The guard was holding his gun in front of his chest. ‘Oh, for heaven’s sake! That thing’s so heavy it’d break your back.

Where are you from?' He scrutinised Silvertongue's face, as if trying to remember whether he had seen it before. He took no notice of Farid at all. 'You from the north, then? I heard you have a lot of fun up there.'

'That's right.' Silvertongue went so close to the guard that the man took a step back. 'Come on, you know Capricorn doesn't like to be kept waiting.'

The guard nodded sullenly. 'Yes, yes, all right,' he muttered, looking over to the church. 'There's no point standing guard here anyway. What do they think will happen? Do they expect the fire-eater to come and steal the gold? That fellow was always lily-livered, he'll be well away by now, he—' But suddenly, while the guard was still looking at the church, Silvertongue seized the gun and hit him on the head with the butt. Then he dragged him round behind Capricorn's house where it was pitch dark.

'Did you hear what he said?' Farid had quickly gagged the guard and was expertly tying a rope round the man's legs. 'Dustfinger must have escaped! He said "he'll be well away". He can't have meant anyone else!'

'Yes, I heard. But my daughter is still here.' Silvertongue gave him the rucksack and looked round, but the square was now so deserted and quiet it was as if they were the only people left in Capricorn's village. Not a sound was heard from the guard up in the church tower. No doubt tonight he had eyes for nothing but the events taking place on the brightly lit football field.

Farid took two torches and the bottle of inflammable liquid from Dustfinger's rucksack. He got away, he was thinking, he got away! He could almost have laughed out loud.

Silvertongue went back to Capricorn's house, peered into several windows, and finally broke one of them, taking off his jacket and pressing it against the glass to muffle the sound when it broke. Laughter and music drifted up from the car park.

‘The matches! I can’t find them!’ Farid rummaged among Dustfinger’s things until Silvertongue took the rucksack from his hand.

‘Give it to me!’ he whispered. ‘You get the torches ready.’

Farid did as he was told. He carefully soaked the cotton wool in the acrid-smelling spirits. Dustfinger will come back, he thought, he’ll come back to look for Gwin, and then he’ll fetch me. Voices came from one of the alleys. Men’s voices. For a few terrible moments they seemed to be coming closer, but they died away again, swallowed up by the music coming from the car park and filling the night like a foul smell.

Silvertongue was still looking for the matches. ‘Ugh!’ he said, swearing softly and removing his hand from the rucksack. Marten droppings were smeared over his thumb. He wiped them off on the nearest wall, put his hand in the rucksack again and threw Farid a box of matches. Then he took something else out – the little book that Dustfinger kept in a side pocket he had sewn inside. Farid had often looked at it. It had pictures stuck in it, cut-out pictures of fairies and witches, trolls and dragons, brownies, nymphs and ancient trees. Silvertongue flicked through it while Farid was soaking the second torch. A photograph was lying between the pages – the photograph of Capricorn’s maid, the woman who had tried to help Dustfinger and was to die for it tonight! Or had she escaped with him? Silvertongue was staring at the photograph and suddenly it was as if nothing else in the world existed.

‘What’s the matter?’ Farid put the match to the dripping torch. The flame flared up, hissing and hungry. How beautiful it was! Farid licked his finger and passed it through the flame. ‘Here, take this.’ He held the torch out to Silvertongue. It would be best for him, as the taller of them, to throw it through the window. But Silvertongue just stood there gazing at the photo.

‘That’s the woman who helped Dustfinger,’ said Farid. ‘The one they caught too. I think he’s in love with her. Here.’ Once

again he held the burning torch out to Silvertongue. 'What are you waiting for?'

Silvertongue looked at him as if he had been woken from a dream. 'In love ... in love,' he murmured as he took the torch from Farid's hand. Then he put the photograph in the breast pocket of his shirt, cast another glance at the empty square, and threw the torch through the broken window into Capricorn's house.

'Give me a leg up! I want to see it burning!' cried Farid. Silvertongue did as he asked. The room seemed to be some kind of office. Farid saw paper, a desk, a picture of Capricorn on the wall. Someone here could write after all. The burning torch lay among the sheets of paper covered with writing, it licked and gulped, it whispered with delight at such a feast, flared up and leaped on, from the desk to the curtains at the window. Greedily, it consumed the dark fabric. The whole room was filled with red and yellow. Smoke billowed out of the broken window, stinging Farid's eyes.

'I must go!' Silvertongue put him down abruptly. The music had stopped. Suddenly it was eerily quiet. Silvertongue ran off along the street leading down to the car park. Farid watched him go. He had something more to do. He waited until the flames were shooting out of the window, then he began shouting. 'Fire! Capricorn's house is on fire!' His voice echoed over the empty square.

Heart thudding, he ran to the corner of the big house and looked up at the church tower. The guard there had leaped to his feet. Farid lit the second torch and threw it at the church porch. The air began to smell of smoke. The guard froze, turned, and – at last – he rang the bell.

And Farid ran off to follow Silvertongue.



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55

Treachery, Loose Talk, and Stupidity

Then he said, ‘Without a doubt, I must perish; there is no way I can get out of this narrow prison.’

Tales from the Thousand and One Nights

Elinor thought she was showing considerable courage. Of course she still did not know exactly what fate awaited her – and if her niece knew more than she did, she hadn’t told her – but she could be sure it would be nothing pleasant. Nor did Teresa give the men who came to take them up from the crypt the satisfaction of seeing her shed tears. She couldn’t curse them or shout at them anyway; her voice was gone, like a garment she no longer wore. Luckily, she had two pieces of paper with her, crumpled, dirty scraps, much too small for all the words unspoken over nine years. She had filled the paper with tiny writing until there wasn’t space for a single word more. She didn’t want to say anything about herself and what had happened to her, and just waved Elinor’s whispered questions impatiently away. There were questions of her own she wanted to ask, question after question about her daughter and her husband. Elinor whispered the answers into her ear, very quietly so Basta in the adjoining cell would not realise that the two women who were about to die with him had known each other ever since the younger one had learned to walk holding on to Elinor’s endless bookshelves.

Basta was not in a good way. Whenever they looked at him they saw his hands clinging to the bars, knuckles white under his sun-tanned skin. Once, Elinor thought she heard him weeping, but when they were taken out of the cells his face was as vacant as a dead man's, and when their guards locked them up in that unspeakable cage he crouched on the floor in a corner, and sat as motionless as a doll that no one wants to play with.

The cage smelled of dogs and raw meat, and indeed it did look like a dog pound. Several of Capricorn's men ran the butts of their shotguns along the silvery grey bars before sitting down on the benches that had been made ready for them. Basta in particular was the object of enough scorn and derision for ten men, and from his failure to react at all one could only guess at the depths of his despair. All the same, Elinor and Teresa kept as far away from him as they could in the same cage. They also kept away from the bars, from all the fingers poking through, the faces the men made at them, and the burning cigarettes flicked at them. They stood close together, both glad and sorry to be with one another.

On the outskirts of the arena, right beside the entrance and carefully segregated from the men, sat the women who worked for Capricorn. They showed none of the men's ghastly excitement. Most of their faces were downcast, but again and again their glances strayed to Resa with expressions of pity – and dread.

Capricorn arrived when the long benches were full. There were no seats for the boys, so they squatted on the ground in front of the Black Jackets. His face emotionless, Capricorn strode past them all as if they were nothing but a flock of crows that had assembled at his command. Only in front of the cage containing his prisoners did he slow his pace to examine each of the three with a small, satisfied glance. For the fraction of a second, life came back into Basta as his former lord and master stopped by the bars; he raised his head, his eyes pleading

silently, like a dog begging for forgiveness, but Capricorn walked on without a word. When he had seated himself in his black leather armchair Cockerell placed himself behind it, legs planted wide apart. Obviously, he was the new favourite now.

‘For heaven’s sake, stop looking at him like that!’ Elinor snapped at Basta when she realised that his eyes were still following Capricorn. ‘He’s planning to feed you to his friend like a fly to a frog, so how about a little indignation? You were always so ready with a choice selection of threats: “I’ll cut your tongue out, I’ll slice you to pieces ...” What’s happened to all that, then?’

But Basta only bowed his head and stared at the floor beneath his boots. Elinor thought he looked like an oyster with the flesh and life sucked out of it.

When Capricorn was sitting down the blaring music fell silent, and they brought Meggie forward. They had put a horrible dress on her, but she held her head high, and the old woman whom they all called the Magpie had difficulty dragging her up on to the rostrum which the Black Jackets had set up in the middle of the field. A single chair stood on the rostrum, looking as forlorn as if someone had left it there and forgotten it. Elinor thought a gallows and a rope would have looked more suitable. Meggie looked down at them as the Magpie forced her up the wooden steps.

‘Hello, darling!’ called Elinor when Meggie’s frightened gaze recognised her. ‘Don’t worry, I’m only here because I didn’t want to miss hearing you read!’

Everything had fallen so still on Capricorn’s arrival that her voice echoed over the whole arena. It sounded brave and fearless. Fortunately, no one could hear how hard her heart was hammering against her ribs. Nor did anyone notice that she was almost choking with fear, for Elinor had put on her armour, the impenetrable and extremely useful armour behind which she had always hidden at times of need. It had become a little

harder with every grief she felt, and lately there had been grief enough in Elinor's life.

One of the Black Jackets laughed at her words, and a faint smile even flitted over Meggie's face. Elinor put her arm round Teresa's shoulders and held her close. 'Look at your daughter,' she whispered. 'As brave as ... as ...' She wanted to compare Meggie to a hero from some story, but all the heroes she could think of were men, and anyway none of them seemed to her brave enough for a comparison with the girl standing there perfectly straight, scrutinising Capricorn's Black Jackets with her chin jutting defiantly.

The Magpie had brought not only Meggie but an old man. Elinor guessed that this was the writer who had caused them so much trouble – Fenoglio, the creator of Capricorn, Basta and all the other monsters, including the terrible creature Meggie was to bring to life tonight. Elinor had always thought more of books than their authors, and she looked at the old man without much goodwill as Flatnose led him past their cage. There was a seat ready for him only a little way from Capricorn's armchair. Elinor wondered whether that meant Capricorn had found a new friend, but when Flatnose placed himself behind the grim-faced old man she concluded that Fenoglio was more likely a prisoner himself.

Capricorn rose as soon as the old man was seated. Without a word, he let his gaze pass slowly over the long line of his men, as if recalling every one of them, remembering what good and what bad service each had done him. The silence in the arena smelled of fear. All the laughter had died away, and not a whisper could be heard.

'There is no need,' Capricorn finally began, raising his voice, 'for me to explain to most of you why the three prisoners you see here are to be punished. For the rest, it is enough for me to say it is for treachery, loose talk, and stupidity. One may argue, of course, over whether or not stupidity is a crime deserving of

death. I think it is, for it can have exactly the same consequences as treachery.'

As he said this there was a restless stir on the benches. At first Elinor thought Capricorn's words had set it off, but then she heard the bell. Even Basta raised his head as its tolling sounded through the night. At a sign from Capricorn, Flatnose beckoned to five men and strode off with them. Those left behind put their heads together uneasily, and some even jumped up and turned to look at the village. However, Capricorn raised his hand to quell the murmur that had arisen. 'It is nothing!' he called in so loud and cutting a tone that everything immediately fell still again. 'A fire, that's all. And we know how to deal with fire, don't we?'

There was laughter, but some of the crowd, both men and women, were still looking anxiously at the houses.

So they'd done it. Elinor bit her lips so hard that they hurt. Mortimer and the boy had started a fire. No smoke yet showed above the rooftops, and, reassured, all the faces turned back to Capricorn who was saying something about deceit and falsehood, discipline and negligence, but Elinor only half heard him. She kept looking at the houses of the village, though she knew it was dangerous to do so.

'So much for the prisoners we have here!' cried Capricorn. 'Now for those who got away.' Cockerell picked up a sack that had been lying behind Capricorn's chair and gave it to him. Smiling, Capricorn put his hand into it and held something up: a piece of fabric from a shirt or dress, torn and bloodstained.

'They are dead!' called Capricorn to his audience. 'I'd rather have seen them here, of course, but unfortunately there was nothing for it: they were trying to escape and had to be shot. Well, no one will miss the treacherous little fire-eater – almost all of you knew him – and fortunately Silvertongue has left us his daughter, who has inherited his gifts.'

Teresa looked at Elinor, her eyes glazed with horror.

‘He’s lying!’ Elinor whispered to her, although she too could not take her eyes off the bloodstained rags. ‘He’s using my lies, my tricks! That’s not blood, it’s paint, or some kind of dye.’ But she saw that her niece did not believe her. She believed in the bloodstained cloth, just as her daughter did. Elinor could read this on Meggie’s face, and she longed to call out to her that Capricorn was lying, but she wanted him to believe his own story for a little longer – to believe that they were all dead, and no one would come to disturb his festivities.

‘That’s right, boast of a bloodstained rag, you miserable fire-raiser!’ she shouted through the bars. ‘That’s really something to be proud of. Why do you need another monster? You’re all monsters! Every one of you sitting there! You murder books, you abduct children ...!’

No one took any notice of her. A couple of the Black Jackets laughed. Teresa moved closer to the bars, clutching their cold metal with her fingers, never taking her eyes off Meggie.

Capricorn left the bloodstained fabric lying over the arm of his chair. I know that rag, thought Elinor. I’ve seen it somewhere before. They’re not dead. Who else would have started the fire? The matchstick-eater, something inside her whispered, but she refused to listen. No, the story must have a happy ending. It wouldn’t be right otherwise! She had never liked sad stories.



56

The Shadow

My heavens are brass my earth is iron my moon a
clod of clay

My sun a pestilence burning at noon & a vapour of
death in the night.

William Blake,
Enion's Second Lament

In books hatred is often described as hot, but at Capricorn's festivities Meggie discovered it was cold – an ice-cold hand that stops the heart and presses it like a clenched fist against the ribs. Hatred made her freeze, in spite of the mild air wafting around her telling her that the world was a good, safe place. She knew it was *not* – as the bloody cloth on which the smiling Capricorn had laid his ringed hand showed all too clearly.

‘Well, so much for that!’ he cried. ‘And now for the real reason we are all gathered here tonight. Not only are we about to punish the traitors but we’re also going to celebrate a reunion with an old friend. Some of you may remember him, and as for the others, I promise that once you have met him you will never forget him.’

Cockerell twisted his thin face into a sour smile. He was obviously not looking forward to the reunion and, at Capricorn's words, alarm showed on several other faces.

‘But that’s enough talking. Now let’s hear something read aloud to us.’

Capricorn leaned back in his chair and nodded to the Magpie. Mortola clapped her hands, and Darius came hurrying across the arena with the casket that Meggie had last seen in the Magpie’s room. He clearly knew what it contained. His face was even more haggard than usual as he opened the casket and held it out to the Magpie, his head bowed humbly. The snakes seemed to be drowsy, and this time Mortola did not put on a glove before she lifted them out. She even draped them over her shoulders while she took the book out of its hiding-place. Then she put the snakes back as carefully as if they were precious jewels, closed the lid, and handed the casket back to Darius. He stayed on the rostrum, looking awkward. Meggie caught him looking sympathetically at her as the Magpie made her sit down on the chair and placed the book on her lap.

Here it was again, the unlucky thing, in its brightly coloured paper jacket. What colour was the binding under it? Raising the dust-jacket with her finger, Meggie saw the dark red cloth, as red as the flames surrounding the ink-black heart. Everything that had happened had begun between the pages of this book, and only the words of its author could save them now. Meggie stroked its binding as she always did before opening a book. She had seen Mo doing the same. Ever since she could remember she had known that movement – the way he would pick up a book, stroke the binding almost tenderly, then open it as if he were opening a box full to the brim with precious things. Of course, the marvels you hoped to find might not be waiting inside the covers, so then you closed the book, sorry that its promise had not been kept. But *Inkheart* was not a book of that kind. Badly told stories never come to life. There are no Dustfingers in them, not even a Basta.

‘I am told to tell you something!’ The Magpie’s dress smelled of musty lavender, its fragrance enveloping Meggie in a suffocating threat. ‘Should you fail to do what Capricorn asks,

should it occur to you to stumble over the words on purpose, or distort them so that the guest Capricorn is expecting does not come, then ...' Mortola paused and Meggie felt the old woman's breath on her cheek, 'then Cockerell will cut the old man's throat. Capricorn may not give the order himself, because he believes the stupid lies the old man told him, but I don't, and Cockerell will do as I say. Understand me, my little cherub?' She pinched Meggie's cheek with her bony fingers. Meggie shook off her hand and looked at Cockerell. He moved up behind Fenoglio, smiled at her, and ran a finger across the old man's throat. Fenoglio pushed him away, and looked at Meggie as if one look could convey everything he wanted to say to her and give her: encouragement, comfort, and maybe even a little amusement in the face of all the horrors surrounding them.

Whether or not their plan worked depended on him and his words – and Meggie's reading.

Meggie felt the paper in her sleeve, scratching her skin. Her hands seemed like the hands of a stranger as she leafed through the pages of the book. The place where she was to begin was no longer marked by a folded corner. A bookmark as black as charred wood lay between the pages. 'Push your hair back from your forehead,' Fenoglio had told her. 'That will be the signal to me.' But just as she raised her left hand the crowd on the benches became restless again.

Flatnose was back, with soot marks on his face. He hurried to Capricorn's side and whispered something to him. Capricorn frowned and looked towards the houses. Now Meggie saw two plumes of smoke rising into the sky from behind the church tower.

Capricorn rose quickly from his chair. He tried to sound composed, ironic, like a man amused at some childish prank, but his face told a different story. 'I am sorry to have to spoil the fun for a few more of you, but tonight the red rooster is crowing here too. A feeble little rooster, but its neck must be wrung all the same. Flatnose, take another ten men back with

you.' Flatnose obeyed and marched off with his reinforcements. The benches now looked a good deal emptier. 'And don't any of you show your faces back here before you've found the fire-raiser!' Capricorn called after them. 'Whoever it is, we'll teach him not to start fires in the Devil's own domain – we'll teach him a lesson, right here and now!'

Someone laughed, but most of those who had stayed behind were looking uneasily in the direction of the village. Some of the maids had actually risen to their feet, but the Magpie called their names in a sharp voice, and they were quick to sit back down with the others, like schoolchildren unfairly slapped on the hand. Nonetheless, the restlessness persisted. Scarcely anyone was looking at Meggie, almost all the members of her audience had turned their backs to her, and were pointing at the smoke and whispering to one another. A red glow was creeping up the church tower, and grey smoke formed a dense cloud above the rooftops.

'What is all this? Why are you staring at that little wisp of smoke?' There was no missing the anger in Capricorn's voice now. 'A bit of smoke, a few flames – so what? Are you going to let that spoil our festivities? Fire is our best friend, have you forgotten?'

Meggie saw the doubting faces turn back towards him. Then she heard a name. Dustfinger. A woman's voice had called it out.

'What does that mean?' Capricorn's voice was so sharp that Darius almost dropped the casket of snakes. 'There is no Dustfinger any more. He's lying up there in the hills with his mouth full of earth and that marten of his on his breast. I never want to hear his name again. He is forgotten as if he had never been—'

'That's not true.'

Meggie's voice rang out over the arena so loud and clear that she herself was alarmed. 'He's here!' She held up the book.'

Never mind what you do to him. Everyone who reads this story will see him – you can even hear his voice, and see the way he laughs and breathes fire.’

All went perfectly quiet. A few feet scraped uneasily on the red clinkers of the old football field – then, suddenly, Meggie heard something behind her. It was a ticking like the sound of a clock, yet not quite the same; it sounded like a human tongue imitating a clock: *tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick*.

The sound was coming from among the cars parked behind the wire fence with their dazzling headlights on. Meggie couldn’t help it – she looked round, in spite of the Magpie and all the suspicious eyes turned on her. She could have kicked herself for being so stupid. Suppose they had seen it too – the thin figure rising among the cars and quickly ducking down again. But no one seemed to have noticed her glance any more than the ticking.

‘A very fine speech!’ said Capricorn slowly. ‘But you’re not here to make funeral orations for dead traitors. You’re here to read aloud, and I am not going to tell you so again.’

Meggie forced herself to look at Capricorn. She mustn’t look at the cars again. Suppose that really had been Farid? Suppose she hadn’t imagined the ticking?

The Magpie was watching her suspiciously. Perhaps she had heard it too, that soft, harmless ticking, nothing but a tongue clicking against someone’s teeth. What did it mean, unless you knew the story of Captain Hook and his fear of the crocodile with the ticking clock inside it? The Magpie wouldn’t have read it, but Mo knew that Meggie would understand his signal. He had woken her up often enough with that ticking sound, right beside her ear, so close that it tickled. ‘Breakfast time, Meggie!’ he used to whisper. ‘The crocodile’s here!’

That was it. Mo knew she would recognise the ticking that helped Peter Pan to go aboard Captain Hook’s ship and rescue Wendy. He couldn’t have given her a better signal.

Wendy, thought Meggie. What had happened next? For a moment she almost forgot where she was, but the Magpie reminded her. She slapped Meggie's face with the flat of her hand.

'Start reading, will you, little witch!' she hissed. And so Meggie obeyed.

Hastily, she removed the black bookmark from the pages where it lay. She must hurry, she must read before Mo did anything silly. He didn't know what she and Fenoglio were planning.

'I'm going to start now, and I don't want anyone disturbing me!' she cried. '*Anyone!* Is that understood?' Oh please, let Mo understand, she thought, please!

A few of Capricorn's remaining men laughed, but Capricorn himself leaned back and folded his arms in anticipation. 'Yes, just you take heed of what the girl said!' he called. 'Anyone who disturbs her will be given to the Shadow to welcome him here.'

Meggie put two fingers up her sleeve. There they were, Fenoglio's words. She looked at the Magpie. 'Well, *she's* disturbing me!' she said out loud. 'I can't read with her standing so close behind me.'

Capricorn gestured impatiently to the Magpie. Mortola's face looked sour, as if he had told her to eat a bar of soap, but she took two or three reluctant steps back. That would have to do.

Meggie raised her hand and pushed the hair back from her forehead.

The signal for Fenoglio.

He instantly launched into his performance. 'No, no, no! She's not to read!' he cried, moving towards Capricorn before Cockerell could stop him. 'I can't allow it! I am the author of this story, and I didn't write it to be misused for purposes of violence and murder!'

Cockerell tried to put his hand over Fenoglio's mouth, but Fenoglio bit his fingers and side-stepped him with more agility than Meggie would ever have expected of the old man.

'I invented you!' he bellowed as Cockerell chased him round Capricorn's chair. 'And I'm sorry I did, you stinking devil of a villain.' Then he ran off. Cockerell didn't catch up with Fenoglio until he reached the cage containing the prisoners, and in revenge for the mockery and laughter coming from the benches he twisted the old man's arm behind his back so viciously that Fenoglio let out a cry of pain. Yet when Cockerell dragged him back to Capricorn's side Fenoglio was looking quite pleased, because he knew he had given Meggie plenty of time. They had rehearsed it often enough. Her fingers had been shaking as she took the sheet of paper out of her sleeve, but no one noticed anything when she slipped it into the pages of the book. Not even the Magpie.

'How the old man boasts!' cried Capricorn. 'Do I look as if an old fellow like that invented me?'

There was more laughter. The smoke above the rooftops seemed to have been forgotten. Cockerell put his hand over Fenoglio's mouth.

'Once again, and I hope this will be the last time,' said Capricorn to Meggie, 'start reading! The prisoners have waited long enough for their executioner.'

Silence fell again, and once more it smelled of fear.

Meggie bent over the book on her lap. The letters seemed to dance on the pages.

Come out, thought Meggie, come out and save us! Save us all: Elinor and my mother, Mo and Farid. Save Dustfinger if he's still alive, and save Basta too for all I care.

Her tongue felt like a little animal that had found refuge in her mouth, and was now butting its head against her teeth.

'Capricorn had many men,' she began. 'And every one of them was feared in the surrounding towns and villages. They stank of cold smoke, they stank of sulphur and everything that reminds you of fire. Whenever one of them passed by, people closed their doors and hid under the stairs with their children. They called them Firefingers and Bloodhounds; Capricorn's men had many names. They were feared by day, and by night they made their way into dreams and poisoned them. But there was one who was feared even more than Capricorn's villains.' Meggie felt as if her voice was growing stronger with every word she read. It seemed to grow until it filled the arena. *'Folk called him the Shadow.'*

Two more lines at the bottom of the page, then turn it over. Fenoglio's words were waiting. 'Look at this, Meggie!' he had whispered when he showed her the sheet of paper. 'What an artist I am, eh? Is there anything in the world better than words on the page? Magic signs, the voices of the dead, building blocks to make wonderful worlds better than this one, comforters, companions in loneliness. Keepers of secrets, speakers of the truth . . all those glorious words.'

Taste every word, Meggie, whispered Mo's voice inside her, savour it on your tongue. Do you taste the colours? Do you taste the wind and the night? The fear and the joy? And the love. Taste them, Meggie, and everything will come to life. *'Folk called him Capricorn's Shadow.'* How the *sh* hissed as it passed her lips, how darkly the sound of the 'o' formed in her mouth.

'He came only when Capricorn called him,' she read. 'Sometimes he was red as fire, sometimes grey as the ash to which fire turns all that it devours. He darted out of the earth as fast as flames lick their way up wood. His fingers and even his breath brought death. He rose before his master's feet, soundless, faceless, scenting his way like a hound on the trail and waiting for his master to point to the victim. It was said that Capricorn had commanded one of the trolls who understand the whole art of fire and smoke to create the Shadow from the ashes of his victims. No one was sure, for it was also said that Capricorn had ordered those who called the Shadow

to life to be killed. All that everyone knew was that he was immortal, invulnerable and pitiless, like his master.'

Meggie's voice died away as if the wind had blown it from her lips.

Something was rising from the gravel that covered the football pitch. It grew taller, it stretched its ashen limbs. The night air suddenly stank of sulphur. That stench burned Meggie's eyes so that the letters blurred, but she must go on reading while the eerie creature grew taller and taller.

'Yet one night, a mild and starlit night, the Shadow heard not Capricorn's voice when it was called forth, but the voice of a girl, and when she called his name he remembered; he remembered all those from whose ashes he was made, all the pain and all the grief —'

The Magpie reached over Meggie's shoulder. 'What's this? What are you reading?' But Meggie jumped up and backed away before the old woman could snatch the sheet of paper from her. 'He *remembered*,' she read on in a loud, clear voice, 'and he *determined to be avenged – avenged upon those who were the cause of all this misfortune, whose cruelty poisoned the whole world.*'

'Make her stop!'

Was that Capricorn's voice? Meggie almost fell off the rostrum as she tried to keep away from the Magpie. Darius stood there, staring at her in astonishment, the casket in his hands. Then suddenly but deliberately, as if he had all the time in the world, he put down the casket and wrapped his thin arms firmly around the Magpie from behind. Nor did he let go, no matter how hard she struggled and cursed. And Meggie read on as the Shadow stood, watching her. The figure had no face, that was true, but it had eyes, terrible eyes, red as the embers of a hidden fire.

'Get the book away from her!' shouted Capricorn. He was standing in front of his chair, bent double as if he feared his

legs would refuse to obey him if he took so much as a step towards the Shadow. ‘Get it away from her!’

But none of his remaining men moved, none of the boys and none of the women came to his aid. They had eyes for nothing but the Shadow as he stood there listening to Meggie’s voice, as if she were telling him a long-forgotten tale.

‘Indeed, he wanted revenge,’ Meggie read on. If only her voice weren’t shaking so much, but it wasn’t easy to kill, even if someone else was going to do it for her. *‘So the Shadow went to his master, and reached out to him with ashen hands ...’*

How soundlessly it moved, that terrible, gigantic figure!

Meggie stared at Fenoglio’s next sentence. *And Capricorn fell down on his face, and his black heart stopped beating—*She couldn’t say it. She couldn’t. It had all been in vain.

Then, suddenly, someone else was standing behind her. She hadn’t even noticed him climbing up on to the rostrum. The boy was there too, holding a shotgun aimed at the benches – but no one sitting there stirred. No one so much as lifted a finger to save Capricorn. And Mo took the book from Meggie’s hands, ran his eyes over the lines Fenoglio had added, and in a firm voice read to the end of what the old man had written.

‘And Capricorn fell down on his face, and his black heart stopped beating, and all those who had gone burning and murdering with him disappeared – blown away like ashes in the wind.’

A Deserted Village

In books I meet the dead as if they were alive,
in books I see what is yet to come ...
All things decay and pass with time ...
all fame would fall victim to oblivion
if God had not given mortal men the book to aid
them.

Richard de Bury,
The Philobiblon

So Capricorn died, just as Fenoglio had written, and Cockerell disappeared at the same moment as his master fell to the ground, and with him more than half the men left on the benches. The rest ran away, all of them, the boys and women too. Those heading towards the village met some of Capricorn's men running back from extinguishing the fire. Their faces were smeared with soot and full of horror, and not because of the flames that had been licking around Capricorn's house, for they had put these out. No. They had seen Flatnose and several other men vanish into thin air before their very eyes. They were *gone*, as if the darkness had swallowed them up, as if they had never existed. And perhaps that was the truth of it. The man who had made them had now destroyed them, erased them like mistakes in a drawing, like marks on white paper. They were *gone*, and the others, the men who had not been born of Fenoglio's words, were hurrying back to tell Capricorn what had happened. But

Capricorn lay on his face with gravel clinging to his red suit, and never again would anyone tell him anything – about fire and smoke, about fear and death. Never again.

Only the Shadow still stood there, a figure so tall that the men running across the car park saw him from afar, grey before the black night sky, his eyes two blazing red stars, and they forgot the master they had been going to serve. Every one of them ran for the cars. They wanted only to get away, far away, before the being who had been summoned like a dog turned and devoured them all.

Meggie did not come to her senses properly until they had all gone. She had nestled her head under Mo's arm, as she always did when she simply didn't want to see the world. Mo put the book under the jacket which had almost made him look like one of Capricorn's henchmen. And he held her tight while all about them people were running and screaming. Only the Shadow stood perfectly still, as if killing his master had sapped all his power.

'Farid,' Meggie heard Mo say, 'can you get that cage open?'

Only then did she bring her head out from under Mo's arm, and saw that the Magpie was still there. Why hadn't she disappeared too? Darius was still holding on to her as if he were afraid of what would happen if he let go. But she was no longer kicking and struggling. She was just looking at Capricorn, with tears running down her sharp-boned face, over her small soft chin, and falling like rain on her dress.

Agile as Gwin, Farid jumped down from the rostrum and ran over to the cage, without once taking his eyes off the Shadow. However, the Shadow just stood there frozen, as if he would never move again.

'Meggie,' whispered Mo. 'Let's go over to the prisoners, shall we? Poor Elinor looks exhausted, and there's someone else I want to introduce to you.' Farid was already busy with the door of the cage, but the two women inside were watching them.

‘You don’t need to introduce her,’ said Meggie, squeezing his hand. ‘I know who she is. I’ve known for ages. I wanted so much to tell you, but you weren’t here, and now there’s something else we have to read first. The last few sentences.’ She took the book out from under Mo’s jacket and leafed through it until she found Fenoglio’s sheet of paper still among the pages. ‘He wrote them on the other side, there wasn’t any space left on the first page,’ she said. ‘He just can’t make his handwriting small.’

Fenoglio!

Meggie lowered the sheet of paper and looked round, searching for him, but she couldn’t see him anywhere. Had Capricorn’s men taken him with them, or—?

‘Mo, he’s gone!’ she said, dismayed.

‘I’ll go and look for him in a moment,’ Mo reassured her. ‘But now read the rest, quick! Or shall I do it?’

‘No, I will.’

The Shadow was beginning to move again. He took a step towards the dead Capricorn, staggered back and turned as clumsily as a dancing bear. Meggie thought she heard a groan. Farid ducked down behind the cage when the red eyes looked his way. Her mother and Elinor flinched, too, but Meggie read in a firm voice:

‘There stood the Shadow, and his memories hurt so much that they almost tore him apart. He heard them in his head, all those screams and sighs, he thought he could feel tears on his grey skin. Their fear burned his eyes like smoke. Then, quite suddenly, he felt something different, something that made him shudder and forced him to his knees. Then his whole terrible figure disintegrated, and suddenly they were all back again, all the beings from whose ashes the Shadow had been made: men, women and children, dogs and cats, brownies, fairies, and many others as well.’

Meggie saw the arena filling up with them. More and more of them were gathering in a throng where the Shadow had

collapsed, all looking around as if they'd just woken from a deep sleep. She read Fenoglio's last sentence.

'They woke as if from a bad dream and then, at last, everything was all right again.'

'He isn't here any more!' said Meggie when Mo took Fenoglio's sheet of paper from her and put it back in the book. 'Fenoglio's gone, Mo! He's in the story now. I know he is.'

Mo looked at the book and tucked it back under his jacket. 'Yes, I think you're right,' he said. 'But if so, there's nothing we can do about it for the moment. Perhaps the story now goes on beyond the book.' He led Meggie away with him down from the rostrum, past all the people and the strange creatures crowding into the arena outside Capricorn's village as if they had always been there. Darius followed them. He had finally let go of the Magpie, who was now standing with her bony hands gripping the back of the chair where Meggie had been sitting. She was weeping soundlessly, her face crumpled, as if her whole being were made of tears.

A tiny, blue-skinned fairy apologised profusely when it fluttered into Meggie's hair as she and Mo went towards the cage containing her mother and Elinor. Then a shaggy creature who looked half human, half animal stumbled across her path, and finally she almost trod on a tiny little man who seemed to be made entirely of glass. Capricorn's village had acquired some strange new inhabitants.

Farid was still trying to get the lock open when they reached the cage. He was picking at it, looking angry, and muttering something to the effect that Dustfinger had shown him just how to do it and this must be a very special sort of lock.

'Oh, wonderful!' said Elinor sarcastically, pressing her face to the bars from inside. 'So the Shadow didn't eat us after all, but we'll be left to starve in a cage. Well, well! What do you think of your daughter, Mo? Isn't she a brave little thing? I couldn't

have uttered a word myself, not a single word. My God, my heart almost stopped when that old woman tried to get the book away from her.'

Mo put his hand on Meggie's shoulder and smiled, but he was looking at someone else. Nine years are a long, long time.

'I've done it! I've done it!' cried Farid, pulling the door of the cage open. But before the two women could take a step, a figure rose in the darkest corner of their prison, leaped towards them, and seized the first person he could lay his hands on – Meggie's mother.

'Wait!' spat Basta. 'Stop, stop, not so fast. Where are you off to, then, Resa? To join your beloved family? You think I didn't understand all that whispering down in the crypt? Well, I did.'

'Let go of her!' cried Meggie. 'Let go of her!' Why hadn't she noticed the dark heap lying so still in the corner? She had just assumed Basta was as dead as Capricorn. And indeed, why wasn't he? Why hadn't he disappeared like Flatnose and Cockerell and all the others?

'Let her go, Basta!' Mo spoke very quietly, as if he had no strength for anything else. 'You won't get out of here, even by using her as a shield. No one will help you. They're all gone.'

'Oh, I'll get out!' replied Basta unpleasantly. 'I shall choke her if you don't let me pass. I'll break her scrawny neck. Did you know she can't talk? She can't make a sound because that useless Darius read her out of the book. She's as silent as a fish, a pretty, mute fish. But if I know you, you'll want her back all the same, am I right?'

Mo made no reply, and Basta laughed.

'Why aren't you dead?' Elinor shouted at him. 'Why didn't you fall down dead like your master, or vanish? Why not?'

Basta merely shrugged. 'How should I know?' he growled, keeping his hand round Resa's neck. She tried to kick him, but he only tightened his grip. 'After all, the Magpie's still here too,

but she always made other people do her dirty work for her, and as for me – perhaps I’m one of the good characters in the story now because they put me in the cage? Perhaps I’m still here because it’s a long time since I set fire to anything, and Flatnose got much more fun out of killing people? Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps ... but anyway here I am, so let me pass, you old book-bag!’

But Elinor did not budge.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You don’t get out of here until you let her go! I’d never have expected this story to have a happy ending, but it has – and a creature like you isn’t going to spoil that at the last moment, as sure as my name’s Elinor Loredan!’ Looking very determined, she placed herself in front of the cage door. ‘You don’t have your knife with you this time,’ she went on in a dangerously soft voice. ‘You have nothing but your filthy tongue, and believe you me, that’ll be no use to you now. Poke your fingers into his eyes, Teresa! Kick him, bite him, the beast!’

But before Teresa could do as she said Basta thrust her away from him so violently that she fell against Elinor and brought her down – her and Mo, for both of them had been coming to her aid. As for Basta, he raced for the open door of the cage, pushed the startled Farid and Meggie aside – and ran away past all the people and creatures still wandering like sleepwalkers around the scene of Capricorn’s festivities. Before Farid or Mo could give chase he had disappeared.

‘Oh, great!’ muttered Elinor, stumbling out of the cage with Teresa. ‘Now that wretched fellow will haunt me in my dreams, and every time I hear something rustling out in my garden at night I shall feel his knife at my throat.’

Not only had Basta gone, but the Magpie also disappeared without trace that night. And when, wearily, they set off to find a vehicle of some kind to get them away from Capricorn’s

village, they found that all the cars had gone too. Not a single one was left in the car park, which was dark now.

‘Oh no, tell me it isn’t true!’ groaned Elinor. ‘Does this mean we have to go the whole wretched way on foot again?’

‘Unless you happen to have a mobile phone with you,’ said Mo. He had not moved from Teresa’s side since Basta had made his escape. He had looked with concern at her neck, where the red marks left by Basta’s fingers were still visible, and he had run a strand of her hair through his fingers and said he almost liked it better now it was darker. But nine years are a long time, and Meggie saw how careful they were with each other, like people on a narrow bridge crossing a wide, wide void.

Of course Elinor did not have her mobile. Capricorn had had it taken away from her, and although Farid immediately offered to go and search Capricorn’s fire-blackened house for it, it did not turn up. So they finally decided to spend one last night in the village, along with all the creatures that Fenoglio had brought back to life. It was still a beautiful, mild night, and sleeping under the trees would be quite comfortable. Meggie and Mo found plenty of blankets in the now deserted houses. But they did not go back into Capricorn’s house. Meggie never wanted to set foot inside it again, not because of the acrid smell of burning seeping out of its windows, or the charred doors, but because of the memories that leaped out at her like fierce animals at the mere sight of the place.

Sitting between Mo and her mother under one of the old oaks surrounding the car park, Meggie thought for a moment of Dustfinger, and wondered whether perhaps Capricorn had been telling the truth after all. Maybe he really was dead and buried somewhere in the hills. I may never find out what’s happened to him, she thought, as one of the blue fairies rocked back and forth on a twig above her, its face bland and happy.

The whole village seemed to be enchanted that night. The air was full of buzzing and murmuring, and the figures wandering

round the car park looked as if they had escaped from the dreams of children and not the words of an old man. That was something else Meggie kept asking herself during the night: where was Fenoglio now, and did he like it in his own story? She so much hoped so. But she knew he would miss his grandchildren and their games of hide-and-seek in his kitchen cupboard.

Before Meggie's eyes closed, she saw Elinor walking about among the trolls and fairies, looking happier than she had ever seen her. And her own parents were sitting to the left and right of Meggie, her mother was writing and writing, on leaves from the trees, on the fabric of her dress, in the sand. There were so many words, so many tales to tell.



58

Homesickness

Yet Bastian knew he couldn't leave without the book. It was clear to him that he had only come to the shop because of this book. It had called him in some mysterious way, because it wanted to be his, because it had somehow always belonged to him.

Michael Ende,
The Neverending Story

Dustfinger watched it all from a rooftop far enough from the scene of Capricorn's festivities for him to feel safe from the Shadow, but close enough for him to see everything through the binoculars he had found in Basta's house. At first he had meant to stay in hiding. He had seen the Shadow kill too often already. Yet a strange feeling, as irrational as Basta's good-luck charms, had driven him out: a feeling that he could protect the book just by his presence. When he slipped into the alley he felt something else too. He didn't like to admit it to himself, but he wanted to see Basta die through the same binoculars that Basta himself had so often turned on his future victims.

So he sat on the tiles of a dilapidated roof, his back against the cold chimney, his face blackened with soot (for the face is treacherously pale by night), and watched smoke rise into the sky from Capricorn's house. He saw Flatnose set out with several men to extinguish the fire. He saw the Shadow emerge from the ground, he saw the old man disappear with an

expression of infinite amazement on his face, and he saw Capricorn die the death he himself had summoned. Unfortunately Basta did not die as well, which was really annoying. Dustfinger saw him running away. And he saw the Magpie follow him.

He, Dustfinger the spectator, saw it all.

He had often been just a spectator, and this was not his story. What were they to him, Silvertongue and his daughter, the boy, the bookworm, and the woman who was another man's wife once more? She could have escaped with him, but she had stayed in the crypt with her daughter, so he had thrust her out of his heart as he always did with anyone who tried to stay there too long. He was glad that the Shadow hadn't taken them all, but they were none of his business any more. From now on Resa would be telling Silvertongue all the wonderful stories that drove away loneliness and homesickness and fear again. Why should it bother him?

But what about the fairies and the brownies suddenly stumbling around the scene of Capricorn's festivities? They were as out of place in this world as he was – and they too wouldn't let him forget that he was still here for one reason alone. He was interested only in the book, nothing but the book, and when he saw Silvertongue hide it under his jacket he decided to get it back. The book at least would be his. It must be his. He would stroke the pages, and if he closed his eyes at the same time he would be home again.

The old man was there now, the old man with the wrinkled face. Crazy. If only you hadn't been so afraid, Dustfinger, he thought bitterly. But you're a coward and you always will be. Why wasn't it *you* standing beside Capricorn? Why didn't you venture down? Then perhaps *you* would have disappeared back into the book instead of the old man.

The fairy with the butterfly wings and milky white face had flown after him. She was a vain little thing. Whenever she

caught sight of her reflection in a window she lingered, smiling in front of it, oblivious to all else. She turned and preened in the air, ran her fingers through her hair and examined herself as if delighted by her own beauty all over again. The fairies he had known had not been particularly vain. On the contrary, sometimes they positively enjoyed smearing their tiny faces with mud or pollen, and then asked him, giggling, to guess which of them it was behind all the muck.

Perhaps I ought to catch myself one, thought Dustfinger. They could make me invisible. It would be wonderful to be invisible now and then. Or a troll – I could make him part of my show. Everyone would think he was just a little human being in a furry suit. No one can stand on his head as long as a troll, no one can make faces so well either, and those funny little dances they do – yes, why not?

When the moon had travelled half-way across the sky and Dustfinger was still sitting on the roof, the fairy with the butterfly wings grew impatient. Her tinkling sounded shrill and angry as she flew round him. What did she want? Did she want him to take her back where she came from, back to the place where all fairies had butterfly wings and people understood their language?

‘You’ve picked the wrong man here,’ he told her quietly. ‘See that girl down there, and the man beside the woman with the dark blonde hair? They’re what you need, but I might as well warn you: they’re very good at luring people into their world, and not so good at sending them home again. Still, you can try! Maybe you’ll have better luck than me.’

The fairy turned in the air, looked down, cast him a final injured glance and flew away. Dustfinger saw her brightness mingle with the light of the other fairies flying around and chasing each other through the branches of the trees. They were so forgetful. No grief or sorrow lived longer than a day in their little heads – and, who knows, perhaps the mild night air had already made them forget that this was not their own story.

Faint light was coming into the sky by the time they were all asleep down there. Only the boy kept watch. He was a suspicious boy, always on his guard, always careful except when he played with fire. Dustfinger couldn't help smiling when he thought of Farid's eager face, and the way he had burned his lips when he secretly took the torches from his rucksack. The boy would be no problem, no, none at all.

Silvertongue and Resa were asleep under a tree with Meggie between them, sheltered like a young bird in a warm nest. Elinor was sleeping not far away, and smiling in her sleep. Dustfinger had never seen her look so happy. One of the fairies was lying curled up like a caterpillar on her breast, with Elinor's hand around it. The fairy's face was not much bigger than the ball of her thumb, and her fairy light shone between Elinor's strong fingers like the light of a captive star.

Farid stood up as soon as he saw Dustfinger coming. He had a shotgun in his hand. It must have belonged to one of Capricorn's men.

'You—you're not dead?' Farid breathed incredulously. He still wore no shoes, which was hardly surprising, for he had always been falling over the shoelaces, and tying a bow had presented him with problems.

'No, I'm not.' Dustfinger stopped beside Silvertongue and looked down on him and Resa. 'Where's Gwin?' he asked the boy. 'I hope you've been looking after him!'

'He ran away after they shot at us, but he came back.' There was pride in the boy's voice.

'Ah.' Dustfinger crouched down beside Silvertongue. 'Well, he always knew when it was time to run, just like his master.'

'We left him at our camp up by the burnt-out cottage last night, because we knew it was going to be dangerous,' the boy went on. 'But I was going to fetch him as soon as I came off watch.'

‘Well, I can do that now. Don’t worry, he’s sure to be all right. A marten like Gwin will always survive.’ Dustfinger reached out his hand and put it under Silvertongue’s jacket.

‘What are you doing?’ The boy’s voice sounded uneasy.

‘Just taking what’s mine,’ replied Dustfinger.

Silvertongue did not stir as Dustfinger slipped the book out. He was sleeping well and soundly, and what was there now to disturb his sleep? He had everything his heart desired.

‘It’s not yours!’

‘Yes, it is.’ Dustfinger stood up. He looked up at the branches. There were three fairies asleep up there. He’d always wondered how they could sleep perched in the trees without falling to the ground. Carefully, he took two of them off the spindly branch where they were lying, blew gently into their faces as they opened their eyes and yawned, and put them in his pocket.

‘Blowing at them makes them sleepy,’ he explained to the boy. ‘Just a little tip in case you ever have anything to do with fairies. But I think it only works on the blue sort.’

He didn’t bother to wake a troll. They were an obstinate lot; it would take a long time to persuade one of them to go with him, and very likely it would disturb Silvertongue.

‘Let me come too!’ The boy barred his way. ‘Here, I’ve got your rucksack.’ He held it up, as if to buy Dustfinger’s company with it.

‘No.’ Dustfinger took the rucksack from him, slung it over his shoulders and turned his back on the boy.

‘Yes!’ Farid ran after him. ‘You must let me come too! Or what am I going to tell Silvertongue when he realises the book is gone?’

‘Tell him you fell asleep. It happens to a lot of sentries keeping watch.’

‘Please!’

Dustfinger stopped. 'What about her?' he pointed to Meggie. 'You like the girl, don't you? Why not stay with her?'

The boy blushed, and stared at the girl for a long time, as if to commit the sight of her to memory. Then he turned back to Dustfinger. 'I don't belong with them.'

'You don't belong with me either.' Dustfinger walked away again, but when he was a good way from the car park the boy was still behind him. He was trying to walk so quietly that Dustfinger wouldn't hear him, and when Dustfinger turned he stopped like a thief caught in the act.

'What's the idea? I'm not going to be here much longer anyway!' snapped Dustfinger. 'Now I have the book I shall look for someone who can read me into it again, even if it's a stammerer like Darius who sends me home with a lame leg or a squashed face. What will you do then? You'll be left alone.'

The boy shrugged his shoulders and looked at him with his black eyes. 'I can breathe fire well now,' he said. 'I practised and practised while you were gone. But I'm not so good at swallowing it yet.'

'That's more difficult. You go at it too fast. I've told you so a thousand times.'

They found Gwin in the ruins of the burnt-out house, sleepy and with feathers round his muzzle. He seemed pleased to see Dustfinger, and even licked his hand, but then he ran after the boy. They walked until it was light, always heading south towards the sea. At last, they stopped for a rest and ate the food Dustfinger had brought from Basta's larder: some red spicy sausage, a piece of cheese, bread, olive oil. The bread was rather hard, so they dipped it in the oil, ate in silence sitting side by side on the grass, and then went on. Blue and dusty-pink wild sage flowered among the trees. The fairies moved in Dustfinger's pocket – and the boy walked behind him like a second shadow.



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59

Going Home

And [he] sailed back over a year
and in and out of weeks
and through a day
and into the night of his very own room
where he found his supper waiting for him
and it was still hot.

Maurice Sendak,
Where the Wild Things Are

In the morning, when Mo found that the book had gone, Meggie's first thought was that Basta had taken it, and she felt sick with fear at the thought of his prowling round them while they slept. But Mo had a different explanation.

'Farid has gone too, Meggie,' he said. 'Do you think he'd have gone with Basta?'

No, she didn't. There was only one person Farid would have gone with. Meggie could well imagine Dustfinger emerging from the darkness, just as he had on the night when it all began.

'But what about Fenoglio?' she said.

Mo only sighed. 'I don't know whether I'd have tried to read him back anyway, Meggie,' he said. 'So much misfortune has come from that book already, and I'm not a writer who can make up the words he wants to read aloud for himself. I'm only

a kind of book doctor. I can give books new bindings, rejuvenate them a little, stop the bookworms eating them, and prevent them losing their pages over the years like a man loses his hair. But inventing the stories in them, filling new, empty pages with the right words – I can't do that. That's a very different trade. A famous writer once wrote, "An author can be seen as three things: a storyteller, a teacher or a magician – but the magician, the enchanter is in the ascendant." I always thought he was right about that.'

Meggie didn't know what to say. She only knew that she missed Fenoglio's face. 'And Tinker Bell,' she said. 'What about her? Will she have to stay here too now?' When she'd woken up, the fairy had been lying in the grass beside her. Now she was flying around with the other fairies. If you didn't look too closely they might have been a cloud of moths. Meggie couldn't imagine how she had escaped from Basta's house. Hadn't he been planning to keep her in a jug?

'As far as I remember, Peter Pan himself once forgot she'd ever existed,' said Mo. 'Am I right?'

Yes, Meggie remembered it too. 'All the same!' she murmured. 'Poor Fenoglio!'

But as she said that, her mother shook her head vigorously. Mo searched his pockets for paper, though all he could find was a shopping receipt and a felt-tip pen. Teresa took both from him, smiling. Then, while Meggie crouched in the grass beside her, she wrote: *Don't be sorry for Fenoglio. It's not a bad story he's landed in.*

'Is Capricorn still in it? Did you ever meet him there?' asked Meggie. How often she and Mo had wondered that. After all, he was one of the main characters in *Inkheart*. But perhaps there really was something behind the printed story, a world that changed every day just like this one.

I only heard of him there, her mother wrote. They spoke of him as if he had gone away for a while. But there were others just as

bad. It's a world full of terror and beauty (here her writing became so small that Meggie could hardly make it out) and I could always understand why Dustfinger felt homesick for it.

The last sentence worried Meggie, but when she looked anxiously at her mother, Teresa smiled and reached for her hand. *I was far, far more homesick for you two*, she wrote on the palm of it, and Meggie closed her fingers over the words as if to hold them fast. She read them again and again on the long drive back to Elinor's house, and it was many days before they faded.

Elinor hadn't been able to reconcile herself to the idea of another walk all the way down through the thorny hills where the snakes lived. 'Do you think I'm crazy?' she said crossly. 'My feet hurt at the mere thought of it.' So she and Meggie had set off again in search of a telephone. It was a strange feeling to walk through the village – a truly deserted village now – past Capricorn's smoke-blackened house and the half-charred church porch. Water lay in the square outside. The blue sky was reflected in it, and made it look almost as if the square had turned into a lake overnight. The hoses Capricorn's men had used to save their master's house lay like huge snakes in the pools of water. In fact the fire had ravaged only the ground floor, but all the same Meggie would not go in, and when they had searched over a dozen other houses in vain Elinor bravely went through the charred door on her own. Meggie told her where to find the Magpie's room, and Elinor took a gun just in case the old woman had come back to save what she could of her own and her robber son's treasures. But the Magpie was long gone, just like Basta, and Elinor came back with a triumphant smile on her lips, carrying a cordless phone.

They called a taxi. It was rather difficult to persuade the driver that he must ignore the road barrier when he came to it, but luckily he had never believed any of the sinister stories that were told of the village. They arranged to wait for him by the

roadside, so he wouldn't see any of the fairies and trolls. Meggie and her mother stayed in the village while Mo and Elinor went in the taxi to the nearest town, and came back a few hours later driving the two small buses they had hired. For Elinor had decided to offer a home, or 'asylum', as she put it, to all the strange creatures who had landed in her world. 'After all,' she said, 'many people here have little enough patience or understanding for their fellow human beings who are only superficially different to them – so how would it be for little people with blue skins who can fly?'

It took some time for them all to understand Elinor's offer – which was, of course, also made to the men, women and children out of the book – but most of them decided to stay in Capricorn's village. It obviously reminded them of a home that their earlier death had almost made them forget, and of course they could use the treasure that Meggie told the children must still be lying in the cellars of Capricorn's house. It would probably be enough to keep them all for the rest of their lives. The birds, dogs and cats who had emerged from the Shadow had not hung about, but had long ago disappeared into the surrounding hills, while a few fairies and two of the little glass men, enchanted by the broom blossoms, the scent of rosemary, and the narrow alleys where the ancient stones whispered their stories to them, decided to make the once sinister village their home.

In the end, however, forty-three blue-skinned fairies with dragonfly wings fluttered into the buses and settled on the backs of the grey-patterned seats. Capricorn had obviously swatted fairies as carelessly as other people swat flies. Tinker Bell was among those who didn't come, which did not particularly trouble Meggie, for she had realised that Peter Pan's fairy was very self-centred. Her tinkling really got on your nerves, too, and she tinkled almost all the time if she didn't get what she wanted.

In addition to four trolls who looked like very small and hairy human beings, thirteen little glass men and women climbed into Elinor's buses – and so did Darius, the unhappy stammering reader. There was nothing to keep him in the village with its new inhabitants, and it held too many painful memories for him. He offered to help Elinor build up her library again, and she accepted. Meggie suspected that she was secretly toying with the idea of getting Darius to read aloud again, now that Capricorn's malevolent presence no longer left him tongue-tied.

Meggie looked back for a long time as they left Capricorn's village behind them. She knew she would never forget the sight of it, just as you never forget many stories even though – or perhaps because – they have scared you.

Before they left Mo had asked her, with concern in his voice, whether she minded if they drove to Elinor's first. Meggie did not mind at all. Oddly enough, she felt more homesick for Elinor's house than for the old farmhouse where she and Mo had lived for the last few years.

The scar left by the bonfire was still to be seen on the lawn behind the house, where Capricorn's men had piled up the books and burned them. But before Elinor had the ashes taken away, she had filled a jam jar with the fine grey dust, and it stood on the bedside table in her room.

Many of the books that Capricorn's men had only swept off the shelves were already back in their old places, others were waiting on Mo's workbench to be rebound, but the library shelves were empty, and as they stood looking at them Meggie saw the tears in Elinor's eyes, even though she was quick to wipe them away.

Elinor did a great deal of buying over the next few weeks. She bought books. She travelled all over Europe in search of them. Darius was always with her, and sometimes Mo went with them too. But Meggie stayed in the big house with her

mother. They would sit together at a window looking out at the garden where the fairies were building themselves nests, gently glowing globes that hung among the branches of the trees. The glass men and women settled into Elinor's attic, and the trolls dug caves among the big old trees which grew in abundance in Elinor's garden. She told them all that if possible they should never leave her property, warning them urgently of the dangers of the world beyond the hedges that enclosed it, but soon the fairies were flying down to the lake by night, the trolls were walking along its banks and stealing into the sleeping villages, and the little glass people would disappear into the tall grass that covered the slopes of the mountains around the lake.

'Don't worry too much,' said Mo, whenever Elinor bewailed their stupidity. 'After all, the world they came from wasn't without its dangers.'

'But it was different!' cried Elinor. 'There were no cars – suppose the fairies fly into a windscreen? And there were no hunters with rifles shooting at anything that moves, just for the fun of it.'

By now Elinor knew everything about the world of *Inkheart*. Meggie's mother had needed a great deal of paper to write down her memories of it. Every evening Meggie asked her to tell more stories, and then they sat together while Teresa wrote and Meggie read the words, and sometimes even tried to paint pictures of what her mother described.

The days went by, and Elinor's shelves filled up with wonderful new books. Some of them were in poor condition, and Darius, who had begun to draw up a catalogue of Elinor's printed treasures, kept interrupting his own work to watch Mo at his. He sat there wide-eyed as Mo freed a badly worn book from its old cover, fixed loose pages back, glued the spines in place and did whatever else was necessary to preserve the books for many more years to come.

Long after all this, Meggie couldn't have said exactly when they had decided to stay on with Elinor. Perhaps not for many weeks, or perhaps they had known from the first day they were back. Meggie was given the room with the bed that was much too big for her, and which still had her book-box standing under it. She would have loved to read aloud to her mother from her own favourite books, but of course she understood why Mo very seldom did so, even now. And one night when she couldn't get to sleep, because she thought she saw Basta's face out in the dark, she sat down at the desk in front of her window and began to write, while the fairies played in Elinor's garden and the trolls rustled in the bushes. For Meggie had a plan: she wanted to learn to make up stories like Fenoglio. She wanted to learn to fish for words so that she could read aloud to her mother, without worrying about who might come out of the stories and look at her with homesick eyes. So Meggie decided that words would be her trade.

And where better could she learn that trade than in a house full of magical creatures, where fairies built their nests in the garden and books whispered on the shelves by night? As Mo had said: writing stories is a kind of magic, too.



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From the Chicken House

I've always loved books, and dreamt of what would happen if I could join the characters who fire up my imagination. But getting what you want can sometimes be dangerous. Those heroes might be pretty unreliable in real life – and the villains? Well, they could be even more scary if you met them face-to-face.

Inkheart is a novel for everyone who loves to read, and dares to dream about stories that can come to life in more ways than one.

Barry Cunningham
Publisher

OceanofPDF.com

*If you are a dreamer, come in
If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
A Hope-er, a Pray-er, a Magic Bean buyer,
If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire
For we have some flax-golden tales to spin
Come in!
Come in!*

Shel Silverstein

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CORNELIA FUNKE

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell



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*To Brendan Fraser, whose voice is the heart of this book. Thanks for
inspiration and enchantment. Mo wouldn't have stepped into my
writing
room without you, and this story would never have been told.*

*To Rainer Strecker,
who is both Silvertongue and Dustfinger.
Every word in this book is just waiting for him to read it.
And of course, as almost always, last but for sure not least, for
Anna,
wonderful, wonderful Anna, who had this story told to her on many
walks, encouraged and advised me, and let me know what was good
and
what could still be improved. (I very much hope that the story of
Meggie
and Farid has its fair share of the book now?)*

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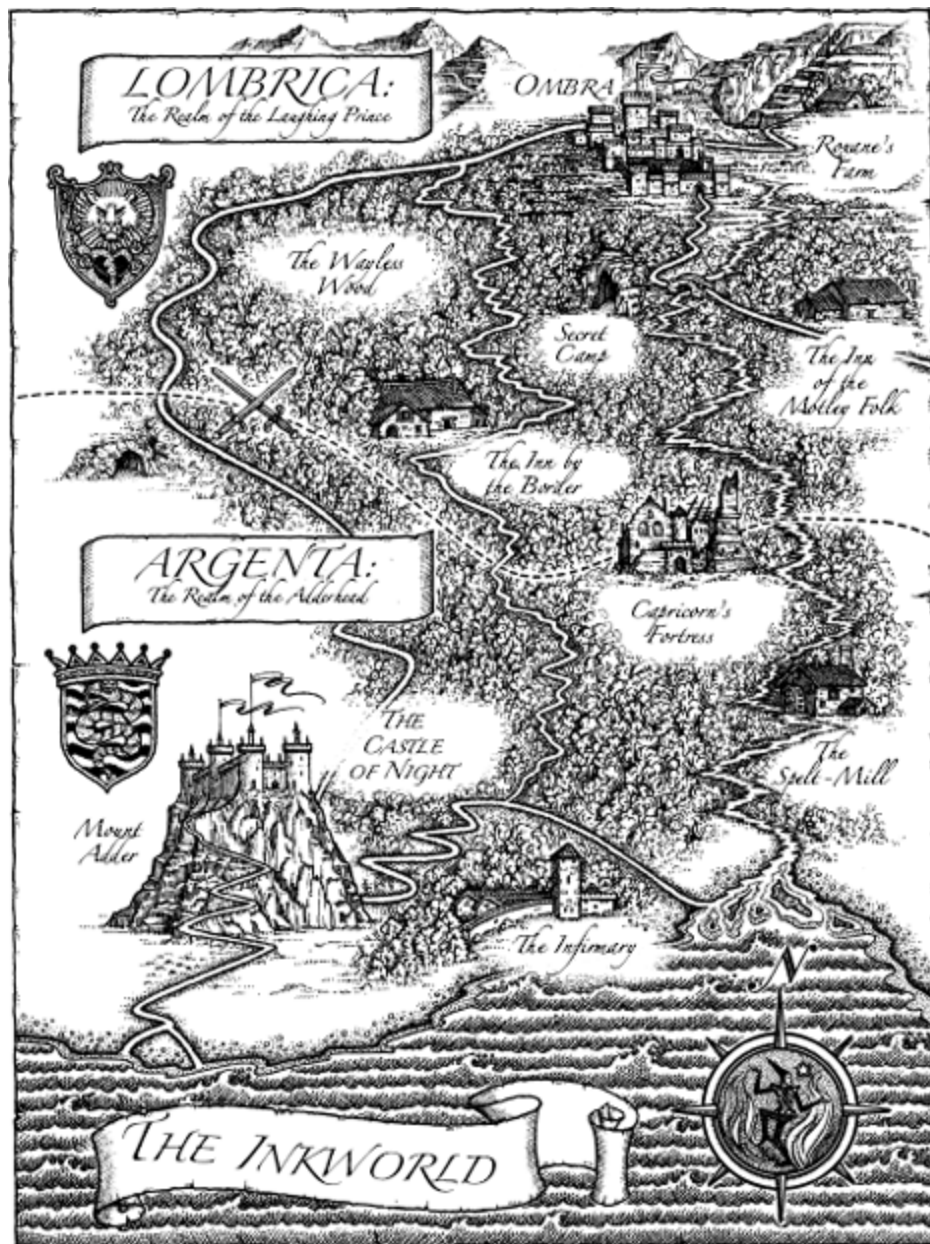
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A note from the author

Praise for *INKHEART*

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Characters from *Inkheart*

Meggie

The daughter of Mo and Resa, now living with her parents and her mother's aunt Elinor. Like her father, Meggie has the rare magical ability to read characters out of books – to bring them into this world by reading the words aloud. But since meeting Fenoglio, the author of the original book of Inkheart, she now dreams of being able to write as well as she can read – so that she can not only bring characters out of books, but also send them back again.

Mortimer Folchart, known as Mo or Silvertongue

A book-binder – or, as his daughter calls him, a 'book-doctor'. Meggie says he can 'paint pictures in the air with his voice'. Since experiencing the awful consequences of reading Dustfinger, Capricorn and Basta out of their story, and almost losing his wife forever, he has avoided reading aloud. Mo is now troubled by his daughter's dangerous fascination with the world of Inkheart.

Resa (Theresa)

Mo's wife, Meggie's mother, and Elinor's favourite niece. Resa is now safely back with her family but has still to recover from the years she spent trapped in the Inkworld, her time in service to the evil Mortola and losing her voice. She tells Meggie of her life on the other side of the pages, scribbling down her memories on paper.

Elinor Loredan

Resa's aunt, a book-collector, also known as 'the bookworm'. Elinor once preferred her books to human company, but is now

happy to have Meggie, Mo and Resa living with her. Darius, the book-loving but stammering storyteller, is also now a part of her household.

Darius

Formerly Capricorn's reader in the first book of *Inkheart*, Darius, like Mo and Meggie, possesses the ability to read characters out of stories – but damages them if he stutters over the words. He now helps Elinor in her library. Basta calls him Stumbletongue.

Fenoglio also known as 'Inkweaver'

Author of the original book *Inkheart*, from which Basta, Dustfinger and Capricorn came – and, with Meggie and Mo's help, the writer of the words used to get rid of Capricorn. He disappeared into his own story that same night.

Dustfinger

A fire-eater whom Mo accidentally read out of the pages of *Inkheart*. He is also known as 'the fire-dancer'. Plucked from his story, Dustfinger has lived in our world for ten years, and would risk anything to go home to the Inkworld. At the end of the first book he stole from Mo the last remaining copy of *Inkheart*. He owes the three scars on his face to Basta's knife, and is never without Gwin, his tame marten, or his young apprentice, Farid.

Farid

A boy read by Mo out of *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, he is devoted to Dustfinger. Nimble and quickwitted, he has a talent for stealing and other robbers' arts, developed in his previous life. He also has a soft spot for Meggie.

Gwin

Dustfinger's pet, a horned marten intended by Fenoglio to play a deadly part in his original tale of *Inkheart*.

Capricorn

The brutal leader of a gang of mercenary fire-raisers, he was read out of the pages of *Inkheart*. Unlike Dustfinger, Capricorn enjoyed his time in this world. He made it his business to burn every remaining copy of *Inkheart* in an attempt to avoid ever returning to the story. But eventually, with the help of Meggie and Fenoglio, he is destroyed by Mo.

Basta

One of Capricorn's most devoted henchmen. Superstitious and in love with his knife, he once slashed Dustfinger's face. At the end of the first book he made his escape, followed by Capricorn's housekeeper and mother, Mortola.

Mortola

Capricorn's mother, also known as 'the Magpie'. A poisoner, she kept Resa enslaved for many years as her servant. Her greatest wish is to see Mo punished for what he has done to her son. She believes that Capricorn is waiting, still alive, in the Inkworld.

And now, in *Inkspell* ...

Orpheus, also called ‘Cheeseface’ by Farid.

Discovered in our world by Dustfinger, he claims to have the ability to both read and write characters in and out of books. He is an ardent but unreliable admirer of the original story of *Inkheart*.

IN THE INKWORLD

The Motley Folk

A loyal band of strolling players (entertainers) to which Dustfinger once belonged, the Motley Folk travel between Lombrica and Argenta, the two principalities of the Inkworld, led by their own Black Prince.

The Black Prince

A master knife-thrower, secretive champion of the poor, and Dustfinger’s best friend from long ago. He is accompanied wherever he goes by a faithful black bear.

Cloud-Dancer

A crippled former tightrope-walker, now a messenger – and an old friend of Dustfinger’s.

Sootbird

An unconvincing fire-eater.

Baptista

Actor and accomplished maskmaker, disfigured by pockmarks.

IN LOMBRICA

Minerva

Fenoglio’s kindly landlady.

Ivo

Minerva's son.

Despina

Minerva's daughter.

Rosenquartz

A tiny glass man and Fenoglio's long-suffering helper.

Nettle

A healer who uses herbs and potions to cure the sick.

AT THE CASTLE OF OMBRA**The Laughing Prince**

Bereaved father of Cosimo the Fair; also known as 'the Prince of Sighs' since his son's untimely death.

Violante, 'Her Ugliness' The unhappy wife of Cosimo, daughter of the Adderhead, mother of Jacopo – the heir to the realms of both Lombrica and Argenta.

Balbulus

An illuminator (illustrator), brought to the library of the Castle of Ombra by Violante.

Brianna

The wilful daughter of Roxane and Dustfinger, maid to Her Ugliness.

Cosimo the Fair

The deceased son of the Laughing Prince.

AT ROXANE'S farm**Roxane**

Dustfinger's beautiful wife, formerly a minstrel who now grows herbs for the healers.

Jehan

The son of Roxane and her deceased second husband.

Jink

Another horned marten.

IN ARGENTA**At the infirmary****The Barn Owl**

The physician who looked after Dustfinger when he was a child.

IN THE CASTLE OF NIGHT**The Adderhead**, also known as ‘the Silver Prince’

A war-mongering tyrant who fears only Death itself. Capricorn and his fire-raisers were in his pay.

Slasher

Formerly Capricorn’s fire-raiser, now in the Adderhead’s service.

The Piper, also known as ‘Silvernose’

Formerly Capricorn’s fire-raiser, he too now sings his dark songs for the Adderhead.

Firefox

Capricorn’s successor, chief bodyguard and herald to the Adderhead.

Taddeo

The librarian of the Castle of Night.



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1

Words Made to Measure

He has been trying to sing
Love into existence again
And he has failed.

Margaret Atwood,
'Orpheus 2', Eating Fire.

Twilight was gathering, and Orpheus still wasn't here. Farid's heart beat faster, as it always did when day left him alone with the darkness. Curse that Cheesehead! Where could he be? The birds were falling silent in the trees, as if the approach of night had stifled their voices, and the nearby mountains were turning black. You might have thought the setting sun had singed them. Soon the whole world would be black as pitch, even the grass beneath Farid's bare feet, and the ghosts would begin to whisper. Farid knew only one place where he felt safe from them: right behind Dustfinger, so close that he could feel his warmth. Dustfinger wasn't afraid of the night. He liked it.

'Hearing them again, are you?' he asked, as Farid pressed close to him. 'How many times do I have to tell you? There aren't any ghosts in this world. One of its few advantages.'

Dustfinger stood there leaning against an oak tree, looking down the lonely road. In the distance, a street lamp cast its light on the cracked asphalt where a few houses huddled by the

roadside. There were scarcely a dozen of them, standing close together as if they feared the night as much as Farid.

The house where Cheesehead lived was the first in the road. There was a light on behind one of its windows. Dustfinger had been staring at it for more than an hour. Farid had often tried standing motionless like that, but his limbs simply would not keep still.

‘I’m going to find out where he is!’

‘No, you’re not!’ Dustfinger’s face was as expressionless as ever, but his voice gave him away. Farid heard the impatience in it ... and the hope that refused to die, although it had been disappointed so often before. ‘Are you sure he said Friday?’

‘Yes, and this is Friday, right?’

Dustfinger just nodded, and pushed his shoulder-length hair back from his face. Farid had tried growing his own hair long, but it was so curly, tangled and unruly that in the end he cut it short again with his knife.

‘Friday outside the village at four o’clock, that’s what he said. While that dog of his growled at me as if it really fancied a nice crunchy boy to eat!’ The wind blew through Farid’s thin sweater, and he rubbed his arms, shivering. A good warm fire, that’s what he’d have liked now, but Dustfinger wouldn’t let him light so much as a match in this wind. Four o’clock ... cursing quietly, Farid looked up at the darkening sky. He knew it was well past four, even without a watch.

‘I tell you, he’s making us wait on purpose, the stuck-up idiot!’

Dustfinger’s thin lips twisted into a smile. Farid was finding it easier and easier to make him smile. Perhaps that was why he’d promised to take Farid too ... supposing Orpheus really did send Dustfinger back. Back to his own world, created from paper, printer’s ink and an old man’s words.

Oh, come on! thought Farid. How would Orpheus, of all people, succeed where all the others had failed? So many had tried it ... the Stammerer, Golden Eyes, Raventongue. Swindlers who had taken their money.

The light went out behind Orpheus's window, and Dustfinger abruptly straightened up. A door closed. The sound of footsteps echoed through the darkness: rapid, irregular footsteps. Then Orpheus appeared in the light of the single street lamp. Farid had privately nicknamed him Cheeseface because of his pale skin and the way he sweated like a piece of cheese in the sun. Breathing heavily, he walked down the steep slope of the road, with his hell-hound beside him. It was ugly as a hyena. When Orpheus saw Dustfinger standing by the roadside he stopped, smiled broadly, and waved to him.

Farid grasped Dustfinger's arm. 'Look at that silly grin. False as fool's gold!' he whispered. 'How can you trust him?'

'Who says I trust him? And what's the matter with you? You're all jittery. Would you rather stay here? Cars, moving pictures, canned music, light that keeps the night away—' Dustfinger clambered over the knee-high wall beside the road. 'You like all that. You'll be bored to death where I want to go.'

What was he talking about? As if he didn't know perfectly well that there was only one thing Farid wanted: to stay with him. He was about to reply angrily, but a sharp crack, like boots treading on a twig, made him spin round. Dustfinger had heard it too. He had stopped, and was listening. But there was nothing to be seen among the trees, only the branches moving in the wind, and a moth, pale as a ghost, that fluttered in Farid's face.

'I'm sorry, it took longer than I expected!' cried Orpheus as he approached them.

Farid still couldn't grasp the fact that such a voice could emerge from that mouth. They had heard about Orpheus's voice in several villages, and Dustfinger had set out at once in search

of it, but not until a week ago had they found the man himself in a library, reading fairy tales to a few children. None of the children seemed to notice the dwarf who suddenly slipped out from behind one of the shelves crammed with well-thumbed books. But Dustfinger had seen him. He had lain in wait for Orpheus, approaching him just as he was about to get into his car again, and finally he'd shown him the book – the book that Farid had cursed more often than anything else on earth.

‘Oh, I know that book!’ Orpheus had breathed. ‘And as for you,’ he had added almost devoutly, looking at Dustfinger as if to stare the scars from his cheeks, ‘I know you too! You’re the best thing in it. Dustfinger! The fire-eater! Who read you here into this saddest of all stories? No, don’t say anything! You want to go back, don’t you? But you can’t find the door, the door hidden among the letters on the page! Never mind! I can build you a new one, with words made to measure! For a special price, between friends – if you’re really the man I take you for.’

A special price between friends? What a laugh! They’d had to promise him almost all their money, and then wait for him for hours in this godforsaken spot, on this windy night that smelled of ghosts.

‘Is the marten in there?’ Orpheus shone his torch on Dustfinger’s rucksack. ‘You know my dog doesn’t like him.’

‘No, he’s finding something to eat.’ Dustfinger’s eyes wandered to the book under Orpheus’s arm. ‘Well? Have you ... done it?’

‘Of course!’ As Orpheus spoke, the hell-hound bared its teeth and glared at Farid. ‘To start with, the words were rather hard to find. Perhaps because I was so excited. As I told you at our first meeting, this book, *Inkheart* –’ Orpheus stroked the volume – ‘was my favourite when I was a child. I was eleven when I last saw it. I kept borrowing it from our run-down library until it was stolen. Unfortunately I hadn’t been brave enough to steal it

myself, and then someone else did, but I never forgot it. This book taught me, once and for all, how easily you can escape this world with the help of words! You can find friends between the pages of a book, wonderful friends! Friends like you, fire-eaters, giants, fairies ...! Have you any idea how bitterly I wept when I read about your death? But you're alive, and everything will be all right! You will retell the story—'

'I?' Dustfinger interrupted him, with an amused look. 'No, believe me, that's a task for others.'

'Well, perhaps.' Orpheus cleared his throat as if he felt embarrassed to have revealed so much of his feelings. 'However that may be, it's a shame I can't go with you,' he said, making for the wall beside the road with his curiously awkward gait. 'But the reader has to stay behind, that's the iron rule. I've tried every way I could to read myself into a book, but it just won't work.' Sighing, he stopped by the wall, put his hand under his ill-fitting jacket and brought out a sheet of paper. 'Well – this is what you asked for,' he told Dustfinger. 'Wonderful words, just for you, a road of words to take you straight back again. Here, read it!'

Hesitantly, Dustfinger took the sheet of paper. It was covered with fine, slanting handwriting, the letters tangled like thread. Dustfinger slowly ran his finger along the words, as if he had to show each of them separately to his eyes. Orpheus watched him, like a schoolboy waiting to be told the mark his work has earned.

When Dustfinger finally looked up again, he sounded surprised. 'You write very well! Those are beautiful words ...'

Orpheus went as red as if someone had tipped mulberry juice over his face. 'I'm glad you like it!'

'I like it very much! It's all just as I described it to you. It even sounds a little better.'

Orpheus took the sheet of paper back with an awkward smile. 'I can't promise that it'll be the same time of day there,' he said

in a muted voice. 'The laws of my art are difficult to understand, but believe me, no one knows more about them than I do. For instance, I've discovered that if you want to change or continue a story, you should use only words that are in the book already. Too many new words and nothing at all may happen, or alternatively something could happen that you didn't intend. Perhaps it's different if you wrote the original story—'

'In the name of all the fairies, you're fuller of words than a whole library!' Dustfinger interrupted impatiently. 'How about just reading it now?'

Orpheus fell silent as abruptly as if he had swallowed his tongue. 'By all means,' he said in slightly injured tones. 'Well, now you'll see! With my help, the book will welcome you back like a prodigal son. It will suck you up the way paper absorbs ink.'

Dustfinger just nodded and looked down the empty road. Farid sensed how much he wanted to believe Cheeseface – and how afraid he was of another disappointment.

'What about me?' Farid went up to him. 'He did write something about me too, didn't he? Did you check it?'

Orpheus gave him a rather nasty look. 'My God,' he said sarcastically to Dustfinger, 'that boy really does seem fond of you! Where did you pick him up? Somewhere along the road?'

'Not exactly,' said Dustfinger. 'He was plucked out of his story by the man who did me the same favour.'

'Ah, yes! That ... Silvertongue!' Orpheus spoke the name in a disparaging tone, as if he couldn't believe that anyone really deserved it.

'Yes, that's what he's called. How do you know?' There was no mistaking Dustfinger's surprise.

The hell-hound snuffled at Farid's bare toes. Orpheus shrugged. 'Sooner or later you get to hear of everyone who can

breathe life into the letters on a page.'

'Indeed?' Dustfinger sounded sceptical, but he asked no more questions. He just stared at the sheet of paper covered with Orpheus's fine handwriting. But Cheeseface was still looking at Farid.

'What book do you come from?' he asked. 'And why don't you want to go back into your own story, instead of his, which is nothing to do with you?'

'That's none of your business!' replied Farid angrily. He liked Cheeseface less and less. He was too inquisitive – and far too shrewd.

But Dustfinger just laughed quietly. 'His own story? No, Farid isn't in the least homesick for that one. The boy switches from story to story like a snake changing its skin.' Farid heard something like admiration in his voice.

'Does he indeed?' Orpheus looked at Farid again, so patronizingly that the boy would have liked to kick his fat shins, but the hell-hound was still glaring hungrily at him. 'Very well,' said Orpheus, sitting down on the wall. 'I'm warning you, all the same! Reading you back is easy, but the boy has no business in your story! I can't put his name into it, I can only say "a boy", and as you know, I can't guarantee that it will work. Even if it does, he'll probably just cause confusion. He may even bring you bad luck!'

Whatever did the wretched man mean? Farid looked at Dustfinger. Please, he thought, oh, please! Don't listen to him. Take me with you.

Dustfinger returned his gaze. And smiled.

'Bad luck?' he said, and his voice conveyed the certainty that no one could tell him anything he didn't already know about bad luck. 'Nonsense. So far the boy has brought me nothing but good luck instead. And he's not a bad fire-eater. He's coming with me. And so is this.' Before Orpheus realized what he meant, Dustfinger picked up the book that Cheeseface had put

down on the wall beside him. 'You won't be needing it any more. And I shall sleep considerably more easily if it's in my possession.'

Dismayed, Orpheus stared at him. 'But ... but I told you, it's my favourite book! I really would like to keep it.'

'And so would I,' was all Dustfinger said as he handed Farid the book. 'Here, take good care of it.'

Farid clutched it to his chest and nodded. 'Now for Gwin,' he said. 'We must call him.' But just as he took a little dry bread from his trouser pocket and was about to call Gwin's name, Dustfinger put his hand over Farid's mouth.

'Gwin stays here,' he said. If he had announced that he was planning to leave his right arm behind, Farid couldn't have looked at him more incredulously. 'Why are you staring at me like that? We'll catch ourselves another marten once we're there, one that's not so ready to bite.'

'Well, at least you've seen sense there,' said Orpheus, his voice sounding injured.

Whatever was he talking about? But Dustfinger avoided the boy's questioning gaze. 'Come on, start reading!' he told Orpheus. 'Or we'll still be standing here at sunrise.'

Orpheus looked at him for a moment as if he were about to say something else. But then he cleared his throat. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, you're right. Ten years in the wrong story – that's a long time. Let's start reading.'

Words.

Words filled the night like the fragrance of invisible flowers. Words made to measure, written by Orpheus with his dough-pale hands, words taken from the book that Farid was clutching tightly, and then fitted together into a new meaning. They spoke of another world, a world full of marvels and terrors. And Farid, listening, forgot time. He didn't even feel that there was such a thing. Nothing existed but the voice of Orpheus, so ill-

suited to the mouth it came from. It obliterated everything: the pot-holed road and the run-down houses at the far end of it, the street lamp, the wall where Orpheus was sitting, even the moon above the black trees. And suddenly the air smelled strange and sweet ...

He can do it, thought Farid, he really can do it, and meanwhile the voice of Orpheus made him blind and deaf to everything that wasn't made of the written letters on the sheet of paper ...

When Cheeseface suddenly fell silent, he looked around him in confusion, dizzy from the beautiful sound of the words. But why were the houses still there, and the street lamp, all rusty from wind and rain? Orpheus was still there too, and his hellhound.

Only one thing was missing. Dustfinger.

But Farid was still standing on the same lonely road. In the wrong world.



2

Fool's Gold

**For plainly this miscreant had sold himself to Satan,
and it would be fatal to meddle with the property of
such a power as that.**

**Mark Twain,
*Tom Sawyer***

‘No!’ Farid heard the horror in his own voice. ‘No! What have you done? Where has he gone?’

Orpheus rose ponderously from the wall, still holding that wretched piece of paper, and he smiled. ‘Home. Where else?’

‘But what about me? Go on reading. Go on!’ Everything was blurred by the tears in his eyes. He was alone again, alone as he had always been before he found Dustfinger. Farid began trembling so hard that he didn’t even notice Orpheus taking the book from his hands.

‘And here’s the proof of it once again,’ he heard the man murmur. ‘I bear my name by right. I am the master of *all* words, both written and spoken. No one can compete with me.’

‘Master of words? What are you talking about?’ Farid shouted in such a loud voice that even the hell-hound flinched. ‘If you know so much about your trade, then why am I still here? Go on, start reading again! And give me that book back!’ He reached for it, but Orpheus avoided him with surprising agility.

‘The book? Why should I give it to you? You probably can’t even read. Let me tell you something! If I’d wanted you to go with him, then you’d be there now, but you have no business in his story, so I just left out what I’d written about you. Understand? And now, be off before I set my dog on you. Boys like you threw stones at him when he was a puppy, and he’s enjoyed chasing your sort ever since!’

‘You brute! You liar! You traitor!’ Farid’s voice broke. Hadn’t he known it? Hadn’t he told Dustfinger? Cheeseface was as false as fool’s gold.

Something made its way between his bare feet, something furry and round-nosed with tiny horns between its ears. The marten. He’s gone, Gwin, thought Farid. Dustfinger’s gone. We’ll never see him again!

The hell-hound lowered its bulky head and took a hesitant step towards the marten, but Gwin bared his needle-sharp teeth, and the huge dog withdrew its nose in astonishment. Its fear gave Farid fresh courage.

‘Come on, give it to me!’ He rammed his thin fist into Orpheus’s chest. ‘That piece of paper, and the book too! Or I’ll slit you open like a carp. I swear I will!’ But he couldn’t help sobbing, which made the words sound nothing like as impressive as he had intended.

Orpheus patted his dog’s head as he stowed the book away in the waistband of his trousers. ‘Dear me, that really scares us, Cerberus, doesn’t it?’

Gwin pressed close to Farid’s ankles, his tail twitching uneasily back and forth. Even when the marten ran across the road and disappeared into the trees on the other side, Farid thought it was because of the dog. Deaf and blind, he kept thinking later, you were deaf and blind, Farid. But Orpheus smiled, like someone who knows more than his opponent.

‘Let me tell you, my young friend,’ he said, ‘it gave me a terrible fright when Dustfinger wanted the book back. Luckily

he handed it to you, or I couldn't have done anything for him. It was hard enough persuading my clients not to just kill him, but I made them promise. Only on that condition would I act as bait ... bait for the book, because in case you haven't caught on yet, this is all about the book. The book and nothing else. They promised not to hurt a hair of Dustfinger's head, but I'm afraid no one said a word about you.'

And before Farid realized what Cheesehead was talking about, he felt the knife at his throat – sharp as the edge of a reed, colder than mist among the trees.

'Well, well, who have we here?' a well-remembered voice murmured in his ear. 'Didn't I last see you with Silvertongue? It seems you helped Dustfinger to steal the book for him, isn't that so? What a fine little fellow you are!' The knife scratched Farid's skin, and the man breathed peppermint into his face. If he hadn't known Basta by his voice, then that stinking breath would have identified the man. His knife and a few mint leaves – Basta was never without them. He chewed the leaves and then spat out what remained. He was dangerous as a rabid dog, and not too bright, but how did he come to be here? How had he found them?

'Well, how do you like my new knife?' Basta purred into Farid's ear. 'I'd have liked to introduce the fire-eater to it too, but Orpheus here has a weakness for him. Never mind, I'll find Dustfinger again. Him and Silvertongue, and Silvertongue's witch of a daughter. They'll all pay ...'

'Pay for what?' said Farid. 'Saving you from the Shadow?'

But Basta only pressed the blade more firmly against his neck. 'Saving me? They brought me bad luck, nothing but bad luck!'

'For heaven's sake put that knife away!' Orpheus interrupted, sounding sickened. 'He's only a boy. Let him go. I have the book as we agreed, so—'

‘Let him go?’ Basta laughed aloud, but the laughter died in his throat. A snarling sound came from the woods behind them, and the hell-hound laid its ears back. Basta spun round. ‘What the devil ...? You damned idiot! What have you let out of the book?’

Farid didn’t want to know the answer. He felt Basta loosen his grip for a moment. That was enough: he bit the man’s hand so hard that he tasted blood. Basta screamed and dropped the knife. Farid jerked back his elbows, rammed them into the man’s narrow chest and ran. But he had entirely forgotten the little wall by the roadside; he stumbled on it and fell to his knees, so hard that he was left gasping for breath. As he picked himself up he saw the paper lying on the asphalt, the sheet of paper that had carried Dustfinger away. The wind must have blown it into the road. With quick fingers, he reached for it. *I just left out what I’d written about you. Understand?* Orpheus’s words still rang in his head, mocking him. Farid clutched the sheet of paper to his chest and ran on, over the road and towards the dark trees waiting on the other side. The hell-hound was growling and barking behind him. Then it howled. Something snarled again, so fiercely that Farid ran even faster. Orpheus screamed, fear making his voice shrill and ugly. Basta swore, and then the snarl came again, wild as the snarling of the great cats that had lived in Farid’s old world.

Don’t look round, he thought. Run, run! he told his legs. Let the cat eat the hell-hound, let it eat them all, Basta and Cheesehead included, just keep running. The dead leaves lying under the trees were damp and muffled the sound of his footsteps, but they were slippery too, and made him lose his balance on the steep slope. Desperately he caught hold of a tree trunk, pressed himself against it, knees trembling, and listened to the sounds of the night. Could Basta hear him gasping?

A sob escaped his throat. He pressed his hands to his mouth. The book, Basta had the book! He’d been supposed to look after it – and how was he ever going to find Dustfinger again now?

Farid felt the sheet of paper that held Orpheus's words. He was still holding it tight. It was damp and dirty – and now it was his only hope.

‘Hey, you little bastard! Bite me, would you?’ Basta’s voice reached him through the quiet night air. ‘You can run but I’ll get you yet, do you hear? You, the fire-eater, Silvertongue and his hoity-toity daughter – and the old man who wrote those accursed words! I’ll kill you all! One by one! The way I’ve just slit open the beast that came out of the book.’

Farid hardly dared to breathe. Go on, he told himself. Go on! He can’t see you! Trembling, he felt for the next tree trunk, sought a handhold, and was grateful to the wind for blowing through the leaves and drowning out his footsteps with their rustling. *How many times do I have to tell you? There aren’t any ghosts in this world. One of its few advantages.* He heard Dustfinger’s voice as clearly as if he were still following the fire-eater. Farid kept repeating the words as the tears ran down his face and thorns gashed his feet: *There are no ghosts, there are no ghosts!*

A branch whipped against his face so hard that he almost cried out. Were they following him? He couldn’t hear anything except the wind. He slipped again, and stumbled down the slope. Nettles stung his legs, burrs caught in his hair. And something jumped up at him, furry and warm, pushing its nose into his face.

‘Gwin?’ Farid felt the little head. Yes, there were the tiny horns. He pressed his face into the marten’s soft fur. ‘Basta’s back, Gwin!’ he whispered. ‘And he has the book! Suppose Orpheus reads him into it again? He’s sure to go back into the book some time, don’t you think? How are we going to warn Dustfinger about him now?’

Farid twice found himself back at the road that wound down the mountain, but he dared not walk along it, and instead made his way on through the prickly undergrowth. Soon every breath

he drew hurt, but he did not stop. Only when the first rays of the sun made their way through the trees, and Basta still hadn't appeared behind him, did he know that he had got away.

Now what? he thought as he lay in the damp grass, gasping for breath. Now what? And suddenly he remembered another voice, the voice that had brought him into this world. Silvertongue. Of course. Only Silvertongue could help Farid now, he or his daughter. Meggie. They were living with the bookworm woman these days. Farid had once been there with Dustfinger. It was a long way to go, particularly with the cuts on his feet. But he had to get there before Basta did ...

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3

Dustfinger Comes Home

‘What is this?’ said the Leopard, ‘that is so ’sclusively dark, and yet so full of little pieces of light?’

Rudyard Kipling,
Just So Stories

For a moment Dustfinger felt as if he had never been away – as if he had simply had a bad dream, and the memory of it had left a stale taste on his tongue, a shadow on his heart, nothing more. All of a sudden everything was back again: the sounds, so familiar and never forgotten; the scents; the tree-trunks dappled in the morning light; the shadow of the leaves on his face. Some were turning colour, like the leaves in that other world, so autumn must be coming here too, but the air was still mild. It smelled of over-ripe berries, fading blossoms, a thousand or more flowers dazing his senses – flowers pale as wax glimmering under the shade of the trees, blue stars on stems so thin and delicate that he walked carefully so as not to tread on them. Oaks, planes, tulip trees towering to the sky all around him! He had almost forgotten how huge a tree could be, how broad and tall its trunk, with a leaf canopy spreading so wide that a whole troop of horsemen could shelter beneath it. The forests of the other world were so young, their trees still children. They had always made him feel old, so old that the years covered him like cobwebs. Here he was young again, just

a child among the trees, not much older than the mushrooms growing among their roots, not much taller than the thistles and nettles.

But where was the boy?

Dustfinger looked around, searching for him, calling his name again and again. 'Farid!' It was a name that had become almost as familiar to him as his own over these last few months. But there was no reply. Only his own voice echoing back from the trees.

So that was it. The boy had been left behind. What would he do now, all alone? Well, thought Dustfinger as he looked round in vain one last time, what do you think? He'll manage better in that world than you ever did. The noise, the speed, the crowds of people, he likes all that. And you've taught him enough of your craft, he can play with fire almost as well as you. Yes, the boy will manage very well. But for a moment the joy of his home-coming wilted in Dustfinger's heart like one of the flowers at his feet, and the morning light that had welcomed him only a moment ago now seemed wan and lifeless. The other world had cheated him again: yes, it had let him go after all those years, but it had kept the only beings to whom he had given his heart there ...

Well, and what does that teach you? he thought, kneeling in the dewy grass. Better keep your heart to yourself, Dustfinger. He picked up a leaf that glowed red as fire on the dark moss. There hadn't been any leaves like that in the other world, had there? So what was the matter with him? Angry with himself, he straightened up again. Listen, Dustfinger, you're back! he told himself firmly. Back! Forget the boy – yes, you've lost him, but you have your own world back instead, a whole world. You're back, can you finally believe it?

If only it wasn't so difficult. It was far easier to believe in unhappiness than in happiness. He would have to touch every

flower, feel every tree, crumble the earth in his fingers and feel the first gnat-bite on his skin before he really believed it.

But yes, he was back. He really was back. At last. And suddenly happiness went to his head like a glass of strong wine. Even the thought of Farid couldn't cloud it any more. His ten-year nightmare was over. How light he felt, light as one of the leaves raining down from the trees like gold!

He was happy.

Remember, Dustfinger? This is what it feels like. Happiness.

Sure enough, Orpheus had read him to the very place he had described. There was the pool, shimmering among grey and white stones, surrounded by flowering oleander, and only a little way from the bank stood the plane tree where the fire-elves nested. Their nests seemed to cluster more densely around the trunk than he remembered. A less practised eye might have taken them for bees' nests, but they were smaller and rather paler, almost as pale as the bark peeling from the tall trunk to which they clung.

Dustfinger looked round, once again breathing the air he had missed so much these last ten years. Scents he had almost forgotten mingled with those that could be found in the other world too. And you could find trees like the ones around the pool there too, although smaller and much younger. Branches of eucalyptus and alder reached out over the water as if to cool their leaves. Dustfinger cautiously made his way through the trees until he reached the bank. A tortoise made off at a leisurely pace when his shadow fell on its shell. The tongue of a toad, sitting on a stone, shot out and swallowed a fire-elf. Swarms of them were whirring about over the water, with their high-pitched buzzing that always sounded so angry.

It was time to raid their nests.

Dustfinger knelt down on one of the damp stones. Something rustled behind him, and for a moment he caught himself looking for Farid's dark hair and Gwin's head with its little

horns, but it was only a lizard pushing its way out of the leaves and crawling up on to one of the stones to bask in the autumn sunlight. 'Idiot!' he muttered, leaning forward. 'Forget the boy – and as for the marten, he won't miss you. Anyway, you had good reasons for leaving him behind. The best of reasons.'

His reflection trembled on the dark water. His face was the same as ever. The scars were still there, of course, but at least he had suffered no further injuries: his nose hadn't been smashed in, he didn't have a stiff leg like Cockerell in the other story, everything was in the right place. He even still had his voice – so the man Orpheus obviously knew his trade.

Dustfinger bent lower over the water. Where were they? Had they forgotten him? The blue fairies forget every face, often just minutes after seeing it, but what about these others? Ten years is a long time, but did they count years?

The water moved, and his reflection mingled with other features. Toad-like eyes were looking up at him from an almost human face, with long hair drifting in the water like grass, and equally green and fine. Dustfinger took his hand out of the cool water, and another hand stretched up – a slender, delicate hand almost like a child's, covered with scales so tiny that you could scarcely see them. A damp finger, cool as the water from which it had risen, touched his face and traced the scars on it.

'Yes, it's not easy to forget my face, is it?' Dustfinger spoke so quietly that his voice was scarcely more than a whisper. Loud voices frighten water-nymphs. 'So you remember the scars. And do you remember what I asked you and your sisters to do for me, when I was here before?'

The toad-like eyes looked at him, black and gold, and then the water-nymph sank and vanished as if she had been a mere illusion. But a few moments later, three of them appeared together in the dark water. Shoulders white as lily petals shimmered beneath the surface, fish-tails with rainbow scales like the belly of a perch flicked, barely visible, in the water

below. The tiny gnats dancing above the water stung Dustfinger's face and arms, as if they had been waiting just for him, but he hardly felt it. The nymphs hadn't forgotten him – neither his face nor what he needed from them to help him summon fire.

They reached their hands up out of the water. Tiny air bubbles rose to the surface, the sign of their laughter, as silent as everything else about them. They took his hands between their own, stroked his arms, his face, his bare throat, until his skin was almost as cool as theirs, and covered with the same fine, slimy deposit that protected their scales. Then, as suddenly as they had come, they disappeared again. Their faces sank down into the dark pool, and Dustfinger might have thought, as always, that he had only dreamed them, but for the cool sensation on his skin, the shimmering of his hands and arms.

'Thank you!' he whispered, although only his own reflection now quivered on the water. Then he straightened up, made his way through the oleander bushes on the bank, and moved towards the fire-tree as silently as possible. If Farid had been here, he'd have been prancing through the wet grass like a foal in his excitement.

Cobwebs wet with dew clung to Dustfinger's clothes as he stood under the plane tree. The lowest nests hung so far down that he could easily reach into one of the entrance holes. The first elves came swarming angrily out when he put in the fingers that the water-nymphs had covered with moist slime, but he calmed them by humming quietly. If he could hit the right note, their agitated swirling soon turned to a tumbling flight, their own humming and buzzing becoming drowsy, until their tiny, hot bodies settled on his arms, burning his skin and leaving a tiny deposit of soot. However much it hurt he must not flinch, mustn't scare them away, must reach even further into the nest until he found what he was looking for: their fiery honey. Bees stung, but fire-elves burned holes in your skin if the water-nymphs hadn't touched it first. And even with their

protection, it was prudent not to be too greedy when you stole the elves' honey. If a robber took too much they would fly in his face, burn his skin and hair, and wouldn't let him go until he was writhing in pain at the foot of their tree.

But Dustfinger was never greedy enough to annoy them. He took only a tiny piece of honeycomb from the nest, scarcely larger than his thumbnail. That was all he needed for now. He went on humming quietly as he wrapped the honey in some leaves.

The fire-elves woke as soon as he stopped humming. They whirled around him faster and faster, while their voices rose to a sound like bumble-bees buzzing angrily. However, they did not attack him. You had to ignore them, act as if you hadn't even seen them as you turned and walked away at your leisure, slowly, very slowly. They went on whirling in the air around Dustfinger for some time, but in the end they fell behind him, and he followed the small stream that flowed out of the water-nymphs' pool and wound slowly away through willows, reeds and alders.

He knew where the stream would take him: out of the Wayless Wood, where you hardly ever met another soul of your own kind, and then on northwards, to places where the forest belonged to human beings, and its timber fell to their axes so fast that most trees died before their canopies could offer shelter to so much as a single horseman. The stream would lead him through the valley as it slowly opened out, past hills where no man had ever set foot because they were full of giants and bears and creatures that had never been given a name. At some point the first charcoal-burners' huts would appear on the slopes, Dustfinger would see the first patch of bare earth among the dense green, and then he would be reunited not just with fairies and water-nymphs but, he hoped, with some of those human beings he had missed for so long.

He moved into cover when a sleepy wolf appeared between two trees in the distance, and waited, motionless, until its grey

muzzle had disappeared. Yes, bears and wolves – he must learn to listen for their steps again, to sense their presence nearby before they saw him – not forgetting the big wildcats, dappled like tree-trunks in the sunlight, and the snakes as green as the foliage where they liked to hide. They let themselves down from the branches with less sound than his hand would make brushing a leaf off his shoulder. Luckily the giants generally stayed in their hills, where not even he dared go. Only in winter did they sometimes come down. But there were other creatures too, beings less gentle than the water-nymphs, and they couldn't be lulled by humming, like the fire-elves. They were usually invisible, well hidden among timber and green leaves, but they were no less dangerous for that: Tree-Men, Trows, Black Bogles, Night-Mares ... some of them even ventured as far as the charcoal-burners' huts.

'Take a little more care!' Dustfinger whispered to himself. 'You don't want your first day home to be your last.'

The sheer intoxication of being back gradually died down, allowing him to think more clearly again. But the happiness remained in his heart, soft and warm like a young bird's downy plumage.

He took his clothes off beside a stream and washed the water-nymphs' slimy deposit off his body, together with the fire-elves' soot and the grime of the other world. Then he put on the clothes he hadn't worn for ten years. He had looked after them carefully, but there were a few moth-holes in the black fabric all the same, and the sleeves had already been threadbare when he first took them off in that other world. These garments were all red and black, the colours worn by fire-eaters, just as tightrope-walkers clothed themselves in the blue of the sky. He stroked the rough material, put on the full-sleeved doublet, and threw the dark cloak over his shoulders. Luckily everything still fitted; getting new clothes made was an expensive business, even if you just took your old clothes to the tailor to be patched up again, as the strolling players usually did.

When twilight fell he looked around for a safe place to sleep. Finally he climbed up on to a fallen oak with its root-ball towering so high into the air that it offered good shelter for the night. The root-ball was like a great rampart of earth, yet some of the roots still clung to the ground as if unwilling to let go of life. The crown of the fallen tree had put out new shoots, although they now pointed to the ground and not the sky. Dustfinger nimbly clambered along the mighty trunk, digging his fingers into its rough bark.

When he reached the roots, which were now thrusting up into the air as if they could find nourishment there, a few fairies flew up, chattering crossly. They had obviously been looking for building materials for their nests. Of course: it would soon be autumn, time for a rather more weatherproof sleeping-place. The blue fairies took no particular trouble over the nests they built in spring, but as soon as the first leaf turned colour they began improving them, padding them with animal fur and birds' feathers, weaving more grass and twigs into the walls, sealing cracks with moss and fairy spit.

Two of the tiny blue creatures didn't fly away when they saw him. They stared avidly at his sandy hair as the evening light, falling through the tree-tops, tinged their wings with red.

'Ah, of course!' Dustfinger laughed softly. 'You want some of my hair for your nests.' He cut off a lock with his knife. One of the delighted fairies seized the hair in her delicate, insect-like hands and fluttered quickly away with it. The other fairy, so tiny that she could only just have hatched from her mother-of-pearl egg, followed her. He had missed those bold little blue creatures, he'd missed them so much.

Down below among the trees, night was falling, but in the light of the setting sun the treetops overhead were turning red as sorrel in a summer meadow. Soon the fairies would be asleep in their nests, the mice and rabbits in their holes and burrows. The cool of the night would make the lizards' legs stiff, the birds would fall silent, predators would prepare to go hunting,

their eyes like yellow lights in the darkness. Let's hope they don't fancy a fire-eater for dinner, thought Dustfinger, stretching his legs out on the fallen trunk. He thrust his knife into the cracked bark beside him, wrapped himself in the cloak he hadn't worn for ten years, and stared up at the leaves. They were growing darker and darker now. An owl rose from an oak and swooped away, little more than a shadow among the branches. A tree whispered in its sleep, words that no human ear could understand.

Dustfinger closed his eyes and listened.

He was home again.



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4

Silvertongue's Daughter

Was there only one world after all, which spent its time dreaming of others?

Philip Pullman,
The Subtle Knife

Meggie hated quarrelling with Mo. It left her shaking inside, and nothing could comfort her – not a hug from her mother, not the liquorice sweets Resa's aunt Elinor gave her if their loud voices had carried to the library, not Darius, who firmly believed in the miraculous healing powers of hot milk and honey in such cases.

Nothing helped.

This time it had been particularly bad, because Mo had really only come to see her to say goodbye. He had a new job waiting, some sick books too old and valuable to be sent to him. In the past Meggie would have gone with him, but this time she had decided to stay with Elinor and her mother.

Why did he have to come to her room just when she was reading the notebooks again? They'd often quarrelled over those notebooks recently, although Mo hated a quarrel as much as she did. Afterwards, he usually disappeared into the workshop that Elinor had had built behind the house for him, and a time would come, once Meggie couldn't bear to be angry

with him any more, when she would follow him there. He never raised his head when she slipped through the doorway, and without a word Meggie would sit down beside him on the chair that was always ready for her and watch him at work, just as she had done even before she could read. She loved watching his hands free a book from its shabby dress, separate stained pages from each other, part the threads holding a damaged quire together, or soak rag paper to mend a sheet of paper worn thin. It was never long before Mo turned and asked her a question of some kind: did she like the colour he'd chosen for a linen binding, did she agree that the paper pulp he'd mixed for repairs had turned out slightly too dark? It was Mo's way of apologizing, of saying: don't let's quarrel, Meggie, let's forget what we said just now.

But that was no good today. Because he hadn't disappeared into his workshop, he'd gone away to see some book collector or other and give the collector's printed treasures a new lease of life. This time he wouldn't come to her with a present to make up the quarrel – a book he'd found in a second-hand bookshop somewhere, or a bookmark decorated with bluejay feathers found in Elinor's garden ...

So why couldn't she have been reading some other book when he came into her room?

'Good heavens, Meggie, you seem to have nothing in your head but those notebooks!' he had said angrily. It had been the same every time, these last few months, whenever he had found her like that in her room – lying on the rug, deaf and blind to all that went on around her, eyes glued to the words with which she had written down what Resa told her – tales of what she had seen 'there', as Mo bitterly called it.

There.

Inkworld was the name Meggie gave to the place of which Mo spoke so slightly, and her mother sometimes with such longing. Inkworld, after the book about it, *Inkheart*. The book

was gone, but her mother's memories were as vivid as if not a day had passed since she was there – in that world of paper and printer's ink where there were fairies and princes, water-nymphs, fire-elves, and trees that seemed to grow to the sky.

Meggie had sat with her mother for countless days and nights, writing down what Resa's fingers told her. Resa had left her voice behind in the Inkworld, so she talked to her daughter either with pencil and paper or with her hands, telling the story of those years – those terrible magical years, she called them. Sometimes she also drew what her eyes had seen but her tongue could no longer describe: fairies, birds, strange flowers, conjured up on paper with just a few strokes, yet looking so real that Meggie almost believed she had seen them too.

At first Mo himself had bound the notebooks in which Meggie wrote down Resa's memories – and each binding was more beautiful than the last – but a time came when Meggie noticed the anxiety in his eyes as he watched her reading them, completely absorbed in the words and pictures. Of course she understood his uneasiness; after all, for years he had lost his wife to this world made of words and paper. How could he like it if his daughter thought of little else? Oh yes, Meggie understood Mo very well, yet she couldn't do as he asked – close the books and forget the Inkworld for a while.

Perhaps her longing for it wouldn't have been quite as strong if the fairies and brownies had still been around, all those strange creatures they had brought back from Capricorn's accursed village. But none of them lived in Elinor's garden now. The fairies' empty nests still clung to the trees, and the burrows that the brownies had dug were still there, but their inhabitants were gone. At first Elinor thought they had run away or been stolen, but then the ashes had been found. They covered the grass in the garden, fine as dust, grey ashes, as grey as the shadows from which Elinor's strange guests had once appeared. And Meggie had realized that there was no return from death, even for creatures made of nothing but words.

Elinor, however, could not reconcile herself to this idea. Defiantly, desperately, she had driven back to Capricorn's village – only to find the streets empty, the houses burned down, and not a living soul in sight. 'You know, Elinor,' Mo had said when she came back with her face tear-stained, 'I was afraid of something like this. I couldn't really believe there were words to bring back the dead. And besides – if you're honest with yourself – you must admit they didn't fit into this world.'

'Nor do I!' was all Elinor had replied.

Over the next few weeks, Meggie often heard sobbing from Elinor's room when she slipped into the library one last time in the evening to find a book. Many months had passed since then – they had all been living together in Elinor's big house for nearly a year, and Meggie had a feeling that Elinor was glad not to be alone with her books any more. She had given them the best rooms; Elinor's old schoolbooks and a few writers she no longer much liked had been banished to the attic to make more space. Meggie's room had a view of snow-topped mountains, and from her parents' bedroom you could see the distant lake with its gleaming water, which had so often tempted the fairies to fly in that direction.

Mo had never simply gone off like that before. Without a word of goodbye. Without making up the quarrel ...

Perhaps I should go down and help Darius in the library, thought Meggie as she sat there wiping the tears from her face. She never cried while she was quarrelling with Mo; the tears didn't come until later ... and he always looked terribly guilty when he saw her red eyes. She was sure that yet again everyone had heard them quarrelling! Darius was probably making the hot milk and honey already, and as soon as she put her head round the kitchen door Elinor would begin calling Mo, and men in general, names. No, she'd better stay in her own room.

Oh, Mo. He had snatched the notebook she was reading out of her hand and taken it with him! And that one was the book where she had collected ideas for stories of her own: beginnings which had never got any further, opening words, crossed-out sentences, all her failed attempts ... how could he just take it away from her? She didn't want Mo to read it, she didn't want him seeing how she tried in vain to fit the words together on paper, words that came to her tongue so easily and with such power when she read aloud. Meggie could write down what Resa described to her; she could fill pages and pages with the stories her mother told her. But as soon as she tried to make something new of them, a story with a life of its own, her mind went blank. The words seemed to fly out of her head – like snowflakes leaving only a damp patch on your skin when you put out your hand to catch them.

Someone knocked on Meggie's door.

'Come in!' she snuffled, looking in her trouser pockets for one of the old-fashioned handkerchiefs that Elinor had given her. ('They belonged to my sister. Her name began with an M, like yours. Embroidered in the corner there, see? I thought it would be better for you to have them than let the moths eat holes in them.')

Her mother put her head round the door.

Meggie tried a smile, but it was a miserable failure.

'Can I come in?' Resa's fingers traced the words in the air faster than Darius could have said them aloud. Meggie nodded. By now she understood her mother's sign language almost as easily as the letters of the alphabet – she knew it better than Mo and much better than Elinor, who often called for Meggie in desperation when Resa's fingers went too fast for her.

Resa closed the door behind her and sat down on the window-sill with her daughter. Meggie always called her mother by her first name, perhaps because she hadn't had a

mother for ten years, or perhaps because, for the same inexplicable reason, she had always called her father just Mo.

Meggie recognized the notebook as soon as Resa put it on her lap. It was the one that Mo had taken. 'I found it lying outside your door,' said her mother's hands.

Meggie stroked the patterned binding. So Mo had brought it back. Why hadn't he come in? Because he was still too angry, or because he was sorry?

'He wants me to put them away in the attic. At least for a while.' Meggie suddenly felt so small. And at the same time so old. 'He said, "Perhaps I ought to turn into a glass man or dye my skin blue, since my wife and daughter obviously think more of fairies and glass men than of me."'

Resa smiled, and stroked Meggie's nose with her forefinger.

'Yes, I know, of course he doesn't really think that! But he always gets so angry when he sees me with the notebooks....'

Resa looked out through the open window. Elinor's garden was so large that you couldn't see where it began or ended, you just saw tall trees and rhododendron shrubs so old that they surrounded Elinor's house like an evergreen wood. Right under Meggie's window was a lawn with a narrow gravel path round it. A garden seat stood to one side of the lawn. Meggie still remembered the night when she had sat there watching Dustfinger breathe fire. Elinor's ever-grumpy gardener had swept the dead leaves off the lawn only that afternoon. You could still see the bare patch in the middle where Capricorn's men had burned Elinor's best books. The gardener kept trying to persuade Elinor to plant something in that space, or sow more grass seed there, but Elinor just shook her head energetically. 'Who grows grass on a grave?' she had snapped the last time he suggested it, and she told him to leave the yarrow alone too. It had grown luxuriantly around the sides of the blackened patch ever since the fire, as if to make its flat

flower-heads a reminder of the night when Elinor's printed children were swallowed up by the flames.

The sun was setting behind the nearby mountains, so red that it was as if it, too, wanted to remind them of that long-extinguished fire, and a cool wind blew from the hills too, making Resa shiver.

Meggie closed the window. The wind blew a few faded rose petals against the pane; they stuck to the glass, pale yellow and translucent. 'I don't want to quarrel with him,' she whispered. 'I never used to quarrel with Mo. Well, almost never ...'

'Perhaps he's right.' Her mother pushed back her hair. It was just as long as Meggie's, but darker, as if a shadow had fallen on it. Resa usually held it back with a comb. Meggie often wore her hair like that too, and sometimes when she looked at her reflection in the mirror of her wardrobe she seemed to be seeing, not herself, but a younger version of her mother. 'Another year and she'll be towering over you,' Mo sometimes said when he wanted to tease Resa, and the short-sighted Darius had confused Meggie with her mother several times already.

Resa ran her forefinger over the window-pane as if tracing the rose-petals that clung to it. Then her hands began speaking again, hesitantly, just as lips can sometimes hesitate. 'I do understand your father, Meggie,' she said. 'Sometimes I myself think the two of us talk about that other world too often. Even I don't understand why I keep coming back to the subject. And I'm always telling you about what was beautiful there, not the other things: being shut up, Mortola's punishments, how my hands and knees hurt so much from all the work that I couldn't sleep ... all the cruelty I saw there. Did I tell you about the maid who died of fright because a Night-Mare stole into our bedroom?'

'Yes, you did.' Meggie moved very close to her mother, but Resa's hands fell silent. They were still roughened from all her

years of toil as a maid, working first for Mortola and then for Capricorn. 'You've told me about everything,' said Meggie. 'The bad things too, even if Mo won't believe it!'

'Because all the same he feels that we dream only of the wonderful part. As if I ever had many of those!' Resa shook her head. Again her fingers fell silent for a long time before she let them go on. 'I had to steal it for myself, in seconds, minutes ... sometimes a precious hour when we were allowed out in the forest to gather the plants Mortola needed for her black potions.'

'But there were the years when you were free too! When you disguised yourself and worked in the markets as a scribe.' Disguised as a man ... Meggie had pictured it over and over again: her mother with her hair cut short, wearing a scribe's tunic, ink on her fingers from the finest handwriting to be found in the Inkworld. So Resa had told her. It was the way she had earned a living in a world which didn't make it easy for women to work. Meggie would have liked to hear the story again now, even if it had a sad ending, for after that Resa's years of unhappiness had begun. But wonderful things had happened during that time too, like the great banquet at the Laughing Prince's castle to which Mortola had taken her maids, the banquet where Resa saw the Laughing Prince himself, and the Black Prince and his bear, the tightrope-walker called Cloud-Dancer ...

But Resa hadn't come into her room to tell all those stories again. She said nothing in reply. And when her fingers did begin to speak once more, they moved more slowly than usual. 'Forget the Inkworld, Meggie,' they said. 'Let's both of us forget it, at least for a little while. For your father's sake – and for yours. Or one day you may be blind to the beauty around you here.' She looked out of the window again at the gathering dusk. 'I've told you all about it already,' said her hands. 'Everything you wanted to know.'

So she had. And Meggie had asked her many questions, thousands and thousands of them. *Did you ever see one of the giants? What sort of clothes did you wear? What did the fortress look like, in the forest where Mortola took you, and that prince you talk about, the Laughing Prince – was his castle as huge and magnificent as the Castle of Night? Tell me about his son Cosimo the Fair, and the Adderhead and his men-at-arms. Was everything in his castle really made of silver? How big is the bear that the Black Prince always keeps beside him, and what about the trees, can they really talk? And that old woman, the one they all call Nettle, is it true that she can fly?*

Resa had answered all these questions as well as she could, but even a thousand answers did not add up to a whole ten years, and there were some questions that Meggie had never put to her. She had never asked about Dustfinger, for instance. But Resa had talked about him all the same, telling her that everyone in the Inkworld knew his name, even many years after he had disappeared. Of course, he was known as the fire-dancer too, so Resa had recognized him at once when she met him for the first time in this world ...

There was another question that Meggie didn't ask – although it often came into her mind – for Resa couldn't have answered it: what about Fenoglio, the writer of the book that had drawn first her mother and finally even its own author into its pages? How was Fenoglio now?

More than a year had passed since Meggie's voice had cast the spell of Fenoglio's own words over him – and he had disappeared as if they had swallowed him up. Sometimes Meggie saw his wrinkled face in her dreams, but she never knew if it looked sad or happy. Not that it had ever been easy to read the expression on Fenoglio's tortoise-like face anyway. One night, when she woke suddenly from one of these dreams and couldn't get to sleep again, she had begun a story in which Fenoglio was trying to write himself home again, back to his grandchildren and the village where Meggie had first met him.

But as with all the other stories she'd started to write, she never got past the first three sentences.

Meggie leafed through the notebook that Mo had taken away from her, then closed it again. Resa put a hand under her chin and looked into her face.

'Don't be cross with him!'

'I never am, not for long! He knows that. How much longer will he be away?'

'Ten days, maybe more.'

Ten days! Meggie looked at the shelf beside her bed. There they were, neatly ranged side by side: the Bad Books, as she secretly called them, full of Resa's stories: tales of glass men and water-nymphs, fire-elves, Night-Mares, White Women and all the other strange creatures that her mother had described.

'All right. I'll phone him and say he can make them a box. But I'll keep the key to it.'

Resa dropped a kiss on her forehead. Then she carefully passed her hand over the notebook in Meggie's lap. 'Does anyone in the world bind books more beautifully than your father?' her fingers asked.

Meggie shook her head with a smile. 'No,' she whispered. 'No one, in this world or any other.'

When Resa went downstairs again to help Darius and Elinor with supper, Meggie stayed by the window to watch Elinor's garden filling with shadows. When a squirrel scurried over the lawn, its bushy tail stretched out behind it, she was reminded of Dustfinger's tame marten Gwin. How strange that she now understood the yearning she had so often seen on his master's scarred face.

Yes, Mo was probably right. She thought about Dustfinger's world too much, far too much. She had even read some of Resa's stories aloud a few times, although didn't she know how dangerous her voice could be when it spoke the words on the

page? Hadn't she – to be perfectly honest, more honest than people usually are – hadn't she cherished a secret hope that the words would take her to that world? What would Mo have done if he'd known about these experiments? Would he have buried the notebooks in the garden or thrown them in the lake, as he sometimes threatened to do with the stray cats that stole into his workshop?

Yes, I'll lock them away, thought Meggie, as the first stars appeared outside. As soon as Mo has made them a new box. The box with her favourite books in it was crammed full now. It was red, red as poppies; Mo had only recently repainted it. The box for the notebooks must be a different colour, perhaps green like the Wayless Wood that Resa had described so often. Yes, green. And didn't the guards outside the Laughing Prince's castle wear green cloaks too?

A moth fluttered against the window, reminding Meggie of the blue-skinned fairies and the best of all the stories that Resa had told her about them: how they healed Dustfinger's face after Basta had slashed it, in gratitude to him for the many times he had freed their sisters from the wire cages where pedlars imprisoned them to be sold at market as good-luck charms. And deep in the Wayless Wood he ... no, that's enough!

Meggie leaned her forehead against the cool pane.

Quite enough.

I'll take them all to Mo's workshop, she thought. At once. And when he's back I'll ask him to bind me a new notebook for stories about this world of ours. She had already begun writing some: about Elinor's garden and her library, about the castle down by the lake. Robbers had once lived there; Elinor had told her about them in her own typical story-telling style, with so many grisly details that Darius, listening, forgot to go on sorting books, and his eyes widened in horror behind his thick glasses.

'Meggie, supper-time!'

Elinor's call echoed right to the top of the stairs. She had a very powerful voice. Louder than the Titanic's foghorn, Mo always said.

Meggie slipped off the window-sill.

'Just coming!' she called down the corridor. Then she went back into her room, took the notebooks off the shelf one by one until her arms could hardly hold the stack, and carried the precarious pile down the corridor and into the room that Mo used as an office. It had once been Meggie's bedroom; she had slept there when she first came to Elinor's house with Mo and Dustfinger, but all you could see from its window was the gravel forecourt, some spruce trees, a large chestnut, and Elinor's grey station wagon, which stood out of doors in all weathers, because it was Elinor's opinion that cars living in luxury in a garage rusted more quickly. But when they had decided to come and live there, Meggie had wanted a window with a view of the garden. So Mo, surrounded by Elinor's collection of old travel guides, did his paperwork in the room where Meggie had slept before she ever went to Capricorn's village, when she still had no mother and almost never quarrelled with Mo ...

'Meggie, where are you?' Elinor's voice sounded impatient. Her joints often ached these days, but she refused to go to the doctor. ('What's the point?' was her only comment. 'They haven't invented a pill to cure old age, have they?')

'I'll be down in a minute!' called Meggie, carefully lowering the notebooks on to Mo's desk. Two of them slipped off the pile and almost knocked over the vase of autumn flowers that her mother had put by the window. Meggie caught it just before the water spilled over Mo's invoices and receipts for petrol. She was standing there with the vase still in her hand, her fingers sticky with drifting pollen, when she saw the figure between the trees where the path came up from the road. Her heart began to thud so hard that the vase almost slipped out of her fingers again.

Well, that just went to prove it. Mo was right. ‘Meggie, take your head out of those books, or soon you won’t know the difference between reality and your imagination!’ He’d told her that so often, and now it was happening. She’d been thinking about Dustfinger only a moment ago, hadn’t she? And now she saw someone standing out there in the night, just like the time, more than a year ago, when she’d seen Dustfinger waiting outside their house, motionless as the figure she saw there at this moment ...

‘Meggie, for heaven’s sake, how many more times do I have to call you?’ Elinor was wheezing from climbing all the stairs. ‘What are you doing, standing there rooted to the spot? Didn’t you say – good heavens, who’s that?’

‘You can see him too?’ Meggie was so relieved she could have hugged Elinor.

‘Of course I can.’

The figure moved. Barefoot, it ran over the pale gravel.

‘It’s that boy!’ Elinor sounded incredulous. ‘The one who helped the matchstick-eater steal the book from your father. Well, he’s got a nerve, turning up here. He looks rather the worse for wear. Does he think I’m going to let him in? I dare say the matchstick-eater’s out there too.’

Elinor came closer to the window, looking anxious, but Meggie was already out of the door. She ran downstairs and raced through the entrance hall. Her mother came along the corridor leading to the kitchen.

‘Resa!’ Meggie called. ‘Farid’s here. It’s Farid!’



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5

Farid

He was stubborn as a mule, clever as a monkey, and nimble as a hare.

**Louis Pergaud,
*The War of the Buttons***

Resa took Farid into the kitchen and tended his feet first. They looked terrible, cut and bleeding. While Resa cleaned them and put plasters over the cuts, Farid began telling his story, his tongue heavy with weariness. Meggie did her best not to stare at him too often. He was still rather taller than she was, even though she'd grown a great deal since they last met ... on the night when he had gone off with Dustfinger. Dustfinger and the book. She hadn't forgotten his face, any more than she could forget the day when Mo first read him out of his own story in *Tales from the Thousand and One Nights*. She'd never met another boy with such beautiful eyes, almost like a girl's. They were as black as his hair, which was cut a little shorter than it had been in the old days and made him look more grown-up. Farid. Meggie felt her tongue relishing his name – and quickly turned her eyes away when he raised his head and looked at her.

Elinor stared at him all the time without any embarrassment, and with as much hostility as she had shown in scrutinizing

Dustfinger when he had sat at her kitchen table, feeding his marten bread and ham. She hadn't let Farid bring the marten into the house with him. 'And if he eats a single songbird in my garden he'd better watch out!' she said as the marten scurried away over the pale gravel. She had bolted the door after him, as if Gwin could open locked doors as easily as his master.

Farid played with a book of matches as he told his tale.

'Look at that!' Elinor whispered to Meggie. 'Just like the matchstick-eater. Don't you think he looks very like him?'

But Meggie did not reply. She didn't want to miss a word of the story Farid had to tell. She wanted to hear everything about Dustfinger's return, about the man with the hell-hound who read aloud so well, about the snarling creature that could have been one of the big cats from the Wayless Wood – and about the words that Basta had shouted after Farid: *'You can run, but I'll get you yet, do you hear? You, the fire-eater, Silvertongue and his hoity-toity daughter – and the old man who wrote those accursed words! I'll kill you all! One by one!'*

While Farid told his story, Resa's eyes kept straying to the grubby piece of paper he had put down on the kitchen table. She looked at it as if she were afraid of it, as if the words on that paper could draw her back again. Back to the Inkworld. When Farid repeated the threat Basta had shouted, she put her arms around Meggie and held her close. But Darius, who had been sitting next to Elinor in silence all this time, buried his face in his hands.

Farid didn't waste much time describing how he had got to Elinor's house on his bare, bloody feet. In answer to Meggie's questions, he just muttered something about getting a lift from a truck driver. He ended his account abruptly, as if he had suddenly run out of words, and when he fell silent it was very quiet in the big kitchen.

Farid had brought an invisible guest with him. Fear.

‘Put more coffee on, Darius!’ said Elinor, as she looked gloomily at the table laid for supper. No one was taking any notice of it. ‘This could be iced tea, it’s so cold.’

Darius set to work at once, busy and eager, like a bespectacled squirrel, while Elinor gave Farid a glance as cold as if he were personally responsible for the bad news he’d brought. Meggie still remembered just how alarming she had once found that look. ‘The woman with pebble eyes,’ she had secretly called Elinor. Sometimes the name still fitted.

‘What a terrific story!’ exclaimed Elinor as Resa went to give Darius a hand; Farid’s news had obviously made him so nervous that he couldn’t measure out the right amount of ground coffee. He had just begun counting the spoonfuls he was tipping into the filter for the third time when Resa gently took the measuring spoon from his hand.

‘So Basta’s back with a brand-new knife and a mouth full of peppermint leaves, I suspect. Bloody hell!’ Elinor was apt to swear when she was anxious or annoyed. ‘As if it wasn’t bad enough waking up every third night drenched in sweat because I’ve seen his foxy face in my dreams ... not to mention his knife. But let’s try to keep calm! Look at it like this: Basta knows where *I* live, but obviously it’s Mo and Meggie he’s after, not me, so this house ought really to be safe as – well, safe as houses for you. After all, he’s not likely to know you’ve moved in here, is he?’ She looked at Resa and Meggie triumphantly, as if this were a conclusive argument.

But Meggie’s response made Elinor’s face darken again at once. ‘Farid knew,’ she pointed out.

‘So he did,’ growled Elinor, her glance turning to Farid again. ‘You knew too. How?’

Her voice was so sharp that Farid instinctively flinched. ‘An old woman told us,’ he said in a wavering voice. ‘We went back to Capricorn’s village after the fairies Dustfinger took with him turned to ashes. He wanted to see if the same thing had

happened to the others. The whole village was deserted, not a soul in sight, not even a stray dog. Only ashes, ashes everywhere. So we went to the next village and tried to find out just what had happened, and ... well, that was when we heard how a fat woman had been there, saying something about dead fairies, but at least, she said, luckily the human beings hadn't died on her too, and they were living with her now ...'

Elinor lowered her gaze guiltily, and collected a few crumbs from her plate with one finger. 'Damn it,' she muttered. 'Yes. Perhaps I did say rather too much in that shop when I phoned you from there. I was in such a state after seeing the empty village! How could I guess those gossips would tell Dustfinger about me? Dustfinger, of all people! Since when do old women talk to someone like him?'

Or to someone like Basta, thought Meggie.

But Farid just shrugged his shoulders, rose to his feet, which were now covered with plasters, and began limping up and down Elinor's kitchen. 'Dustfinger thought you'd all be here in any case,' he said. 'We even passed this way once because he wanted to see if *she* was all right.'

He jerked his head Resa's way. Elinor snorted scornfully. 'Oh, did he, indeed? How good of him.' She had never liked Dustfinger, and the fact that he had stolen the book from Mo before disappearing had done little to lessen her dislike. Resa, however, smiled at Farid's words, though she tried to hide her smile from Elinor. Meggie still clearly remembered the morning when Darius had brought her mother the strange little bundle he'd found outside the front door – a candle, a few pencils, and a box of matches, all tied up with stems of blue speedwell. Meggie had known at once who the bundle came from. And so did Resa.

'Well,' said Elinor, drumming on her plate with the handle of her knife, 'I'm delighted to hear that the matchstick-eater's back

where he belongs. The very idea of him slinking around my house by night! It's just a pity he didn't take Basta too.'

Basta! When Elinor said his name Resa suddenly rose from her chair, went out into the corridor and came back with the telephone. She held it out to Meggie with a look of entreaty in her eyes, and began gesticulating so excitedly with her other hand that even Meggie had difficulty in reading the signs she traced in the air. But finally she understood.

Resa wanted her to call Mo. Of course.

It seemed forever before he came to the phone. He'd probably been working. When Mo was away he always worked late into the night, so that he could get home sooner.

'Meggie?' He sounded surprised. Perhaps he thought she was calling because of their quarrel, but who'd be interested in that stupid argument now?

It was some time before he could make anything of the words she was hastily stammering out. 'Slowly, Meggie!' he kept saying. 'Take it slowly.' But that was easier said than done when your heart was in your mouth, and Basta might be waiting at Elinor's garden gate this very minute ... Meggie didn't even dare to think this idea through to its logical conclusion.

Mo, on the other hand, remained strangely calm – almost as if he had expected the past to catch up with them again. 'Stories never really end, Meggie,' he had once told her, 'even if the books like to pretend they do. Stories always go on. They don't end on the last page, any more than they begin on the first page.'

'Has Elinor switched the burglar alarm on?' he asked now.

'Yes.'

'Has she told the police?'

'No. She says they wouldn't believe her anyway.'

‘She ought to call them, all the same. And give them a description of Basta. You can describe him between you, right?’

What a question! Meggie had tried to forget Basta’s face, but it would live on in her memory for the rest of her life, as clear as a photograph.

‘Listen, Meggie.’ Perhaps Mo wasn’t quite as calm as he made out. His voice didn’t sound the same as usual. ‘I’ll drive back tonight. Tell Elinor and your mother. I’ll be with you by tomorrow morning at the latest. Bolt everything and keep the windows closed, understand?’

Meggie nodded, forgetting that Mo couldn’t see her over the phone.

‘Meggie?’

‘Yes, I understand.’ She tried to sound calm and brave, even if she didn’t feel that way. She was scared, badly scared.

‘See you tomorrow, Meggie!’

She could tell from his voice that he was going to set out right away. And suddenly, seeing the moonlit road in her mind’s eye, the long road back, a new and terrible thought came into her mind ...

‘What about *you*?’ she exclaimed. ‘Mo! Suppose Basta’s lying in wait for *you* somewhere?’ But her father had already rung off.

Elinor decided to put Farid where Dustfinger had once slept: in the attic room, where crates of books were stacked high around the narrow bedstead. Anyone who slept there would surely dream of being struck dead by printed paper. Meggie was told to show Farid the way, and when she wished him goodnight he just nodded abstractedly. He looked very lost sitting on the narrow bed – almost as lost as on the day when Mo had read him into Capricorn’s church, a thin, nameless boy with a turban over his black hair.

That night, before she went to sleep, Elinor checked the burglar alarm several times to make sure it really was switched on. As for Darius, he went to find the rifle that Elinor sometimes fired into the air if she saw a cat prowling under one of the birds' nests in her garden. Wearing the orange dressing-gown that Elinor had given him last Christmas – it was much too big for him – he settled down in the armchair in the entrance hall, the gun on his lap, staring at the front door with a determined expression. But when Elinor came to check the alarm for the second time he was already fast asleep.

It was a long time before Meggie could sleep. She looked at the shelves where her notebooks used to stand, stroked the empty wood, and finally knelt down by the red-painted box that Mo had made long ago for her favourite books. She hadn't opened it for months. There wasn't room in it for a single extra book, and by now it was too heavy for her to take it when she went away. So Elinor had given her the bookcase to hold more of the books she loved. It stood beside Meggie's bed, and it had glass doors, and carvings that twined over the dark wood, making it look as if it hadn't forgotten that it was once alive. And the shelves behind the glass doors were well filled, for by now Resa and Elinor, as well as Mo, gave Meggie books, and even Darius brought her a new one now and then. But her old friends, the books Meggie had already owned before they had moved in with Elinor, still lived in the box, and when she opened the heavy lid it was almost as if half-forgotten voices met her ears and familiar faces were looking at her. How well-worn they all were ... 'Isn't it odd how much fatter a book gets when you've read it several times?' Mo had said when, on Meggie's last birthday, they were looking at all her dear old books again. 'As if something was left between the pages every time you read it. Feelings, thoughts, sounds, smells ... and then, when you look at the book again many years later, you find yourself there too, a slightly younger self, slightly different, as if

the book had preserved you like a pressed flower ... both strange and familiar.'

Slightly younger, yes. Meggie picked up one of the books lying on top and leafed through it. She had read it at least a dozen times. Ah, here was the scene she had liked best when she was eight, and there was the one she had marked with a red pencil when she was ten because she thought it was so beautiful. She ran her finger down the wobbly line. There'd been no Resa in her life then, no Elinor, no Darius, only Mo ... no longing to see blue fairies, no memories of a scarred face, a marten with little horns and a boy who always went barefoot, no memory of Basta and his knife. A different Meggie had read that book, very different ... and there she would stay between its pages, preserved as a memento.

With a sigh, Meggie closed the book again and put it back with the others. She could hear her mother pacing up and down next door. Did she, like Meggie, keep thinking of the threat that Basta had shouted after Farid? I ought to go to her, thought Meggie. Perhaps our fear won't be so bad if we're together. But just as she was getting up Resa's footsteps died away, and it was quiet in the room next door, quiet as sleep. Maybe sleep wasn't a bad idea. Mo certainly wouldn't arrive any sooner just because she was awake and waiting for him ... oh, if only she could at least have called him, but he was always forgetting to switch his mobile on.

Meggie closed the lid of her book-box softly, as if the sound might wake Resa again, and blew out the candles that she lit every evening although Elinor was always telling her not to. As she was taking her T-shirt off over her head, she heard a knock at her door, a very quiet knock. She opened the door, expecting to see her mother outside because she couldn't sleep after all, but it was Farid. He went scarlet in the face when he saw that she was wearing only her underclothes. He stammered an apology, and before Meggie could say anything limped away

again on his lavishly plastered feet. She almost forgot to put the T-shirt back on before going after him.

‘What’s the matter?’ she whispered anxiously as she beckoned him back into her room. ‘Did you hear anything downstairs?’

But Farid shook his head. He was holding the piece of paper in his hand: Dustfinger’s return ticket, as Elinor had tartly described it. Hesitantly he followed Meggie into her room, and looked around it like someone who doesn’t feel comfortable in enclosed spaces. Ever since he had disappeared with Dustfinger, leaving no trace behind, he had probably spent most of his days and nights in the open air.

‘I’m sorry,’ he stammered, staring at his toes. Two of Resa’s plasters were already peeling off. ‘I know it’s late, but—’ and for the first time he looked Meggie in the eye, turning red again as he did so. ‘But Orpheus says he didn’t read it all,’ he went on, his voice hesitating. ‘He just left out the words that would have taken me into the book too. He did it on purpose, but I have to warn Dustfinger, so ...’

‘So what?’ Meggie pushed the chair from her desk over to him and sat down on the window-sill herself. Farid sat down as hesitantly as he had entered her room.

‘You must get me there too. Please!’ He held the dirty piece of paper out to her again, with such a pleading expression in his black eyes that Meggie didn’t know where to look. How long and thick his eyelashes were! Hers were nothing like as beautiful.

‘Please! I know you can do it!’ he stammered. ‘I remember that night in Capricorn’s village ... I remember all about it, and you had only a single sheet of paper then!’

That night in Capricorn’s village. Meggie’s heart always began to thud when she thought of it: the night when she had read the Shadow into appearing, and then hadn’t been able to make him kill Capricorn until Mo did it for her.

‘Orpheus wrote the words, he said so himself! He just didn’t read them aloud – but they’re here on this paper! Of course my actual name isn’t there or it wouldn’t work.’ Farid was speaking faster and faster. ‘Orpheus says that’s the secret of it: if you want to change the story you must use only words that are already in the book, if possible.’

‘He said that?’ Meggie’s heart missed a beat, as if it had stumbled over Farid’s information. *You must use only words that are already in the book if possible ...* was that why she’d never been able to read anything out of Resa’s stories – because she’d used words that weren’t in *Inkheart*? Or was it just because she didn’t know enough about writing?

‘Yes. Orpheus thinks he’s so clever because of the way he can read aloud.’ Farid spat the man’s name out like a plum-stone. ‘But if you ask me, he’s not half as good at it as you or your father.’

Maybe not, thought Meggie, but he read *Dustfinger* back. And he wrote the words for it himself. Neither Mo nor I could have done that. She took from Farid the piece of paper with the passage that Orpheus had written. The handwriting was difficult to decipher, but it was beautiful – very individual and curiously ornate.

‘When exactly did *Dustfinger* disappear?’

Farid shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ he muttered, abashed. Of course – she had forgotten that he couldn’t read.

Meggie traced the first sentence with her finger. *Dustfinger returned on a day fragrant with the scent of berries and mushrooms.*

Thoughtfully, she lowered the piece of paper. ‘It’s no good,’ she said. ‘We don’t even have the book. How can it work without the book?’

‘But Orpheus didn’t use the book either! *Dustfinger* took it away from him before he read the words on that paper!’ Farid pushed his chair back and came to stand beside her. Feeling

him so close made Meggie uneasy; she didn't try to work out why.

'But that can't be so!' she murmured.

Dustfinger had gone, though.

A few hand-written sentences had opened the door between the words on the page for him – the door that Mo had tried to batter down so unsuccessfully. And it was not Fenoglio, the author of the book, who had written those sentences, but a stranger – a stranger with a curious name. Orpheus.

Meggie knew more than most people about what waited beyond the words. She herself had already opened doors, had lured living, breathing creatures out of faded, yellowing pages – and she had been there when her father read this boy out of an Arabian fairy-tale, the boy of flesh and blood now standing beside her. However, this Orpheus seemed to know far, far more than she did, even more than Mo – Farid still called him Silvertongue – and suddenly Meggie was afraid of the words on that grubby piece of paper. She put it down on her desk as if it had burned her fingers.

'Please! Do please at least try!' Farid's voice sounded almost pleading. 'Suppose Orpheus has already read Basta back after all? Dustfinger has to learn that they're in league with each other. He thinks he's safe from Basta in his own world!'

Meggie was still staring at the words written by Orpheus. They sounded beautiful, enchantingly beautiful. Meggie felt her tongue longing to taste them. She very nearly began reading them aloud. Horrified, she clapped her hand to her mouth.

Orpheus.

Of course she knew the name, and the story that surrounded it like a tangle of flowers and thorns. Elinor had given her a book with a beautiful poem about him in it.

**Orpheus with his lute made trees
And the mountain-tops that freeze,**

Bow themselves when he did sing:
To his music plants and flowers
Ever sprung; as sun and showers
There had made a lasting spring.
Everything that heard him play,
Even the billows of the sea,
Hung their heads, and then lay by.
In sweet music is such art,
Killing care and grief of heart
Fall asleep, or hearing die.

She looked at Farid with a question in her eyes. 'How old is he?'
'Orpheus?' Farid shrugged. 'Twenty, twenty-five, how should I know? Difficult to say. His face is like a child's.'

So young. But the words on the paper didn't sound like a young man's words. They sounded as if they knew a great many things.

'Please!' Farid was still looking at her. 'You will try, won't you?'

Meggie looked out of the window. She couldn't help thinking of the empty fairies' nests, the glass men who had vanished, and something Dustfinger had said to her long ago: *Sometimes, when you went to the well to wash early in the morning, those tiny fairies would be whirring above the water, hardly bigger than the dragonflies you have here, and blue as violets ... they weren't very friendly, but by night they shone like glow-worms.*

'All right,' she said, and it was almost as if someone else were answering Farid. 'All right, I'll try. But your feet must get better first. The world my mother talks about isn't a place where you'd want to be lame.'

'Nonsense, my feet are fine!' Farid walked up and down on the soft carpet as if to prove it. 'You can try right away as far as I'm concerned!'

But Meggie shook her head. ‘No,’ she said firmly. ‘I must learn to read it fluently first. That’s not going to be easy, given his handwriting – and it’s smeared in several places, so I’ll probably copy it out. This man Orpheus wasn’t lying. He did write something about you, but I’m not quite sure that it will do. And if I try it,’ she went on, trying to sound very casual, ‘if I try it, then I want to come with you.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, why not?’ Meggie couldn’t keep her voice from showing how hurt she felt by his horrified look.

Farid did not reply.

Didn’t he understand that she wanted to see it for herself? She wanted to see everything that Dustfinger and her mother had told her about, Dustfinger in a voice soft with longing: the fairies swarming above the grass, trees so high that you thought they would catch the clouds in their branches, the Wayless Wood, the strolling players, the Laughing Prince’s castle, the silver towers of the Castle of Night, Ombra market, the fire that danced for him, the whispering pool where the water-nymphs’ faces looked up at you ...

No, Farid didn’t understand. He had probably never felt that yearning for a completely different world, any more than he felt the homesickness that had broken Dustfinger’s heart. Farid wanted just one thing: he wanted to find Dustfinger, warn him of Basta’s knife and be back with him again. He was Dustfinger’s shadow. That was the part he wanted to play, never mind what story they were in.

‘Forget it! You can’t come too.’ Without looking at Meggie he limped back to the chair she had given him, sat down and pulled off the plasters that Resa had so carefully put on his toes. ‘People can’t read themselves into a book. Even Orpheus can’t! He told Dustfinger so himself: he’s tried it several times, he said, and it just won’t work.’

‘Oh no?’ Meggie tried to sound more sure of herself than she felt. ‘You said yourself that I read better than he does. So perhaps I can make it work!’ Even if I can’t *write* as well as he does, she added to herself.

Farid cast her an uneasy glance as he put the plasters in his trouser pocket. ‘But it’s dangerous there,’ he said. ‘Particularly for a g—’ He didn’t finish the word. Instead he began inspecting his blood-stained toes intently.

Idiot. Meggie’s anger tasted bitter on her tongue. Who did he think she was? She probably knew more about the world she’d be reading him into than he did. ‘I know it’s dangerous,’ she said, piqued. ‘Either I go with you or I don’t read aloud from this sheet of paper. You must make up your mind. And now you’d better leave me alone. I have to think.’

Farid cast a final glance at the piece of paper with Orpheus’s words on it before he went to the door. ‘When will you try?’ he asked before he went back out into the corridor. ‘Tomorrow?’

‘Perhaps,’ was all Meggie would say.

Then she closed the door behind him, and was alone with the words that Orpheus had written.

6

The Inn of the Strolling Players

‘Thank you,’ said Lucy, opening the box and taking out a match. ‘WATCH, EVERYONE!’ she cried, her voice echoing round the White Flats. ‘WATCH! THIS IS GOODBYE TO BAD MEMORIES!’

**Philip Ridley,
*Dakota of the White Flats***

It took Dustfinger two whole days to get through the Wayless Wood. He met very few people on the way: a few charcoal-burners blackened with soot, a ragged poacher with two rabbits slung over his shoulder and hunger written large on his face, and a group of the Prince’s game wardens, armed to the teeth, probably on the trail of some poor devil who had shot a deer to feed his children. None of them saw Dustfinger. He knew how to pass unseen, and only on the second night, when he heard a pack of wolves howling in the nearby hills, did he dare to summon fire.

Fire. So different in this world and the other one. How good it would be to hear its crackling voice again at last, and to be able to answer. Dustfinger collected some of the dry wood lying around among the trees, with wax-flowers and thyme rambling over it. He carefully unwrapped the fire-elves’ stolen honey from the leaves that kept it moist and supple, and put a tiny

morsel in his mouth. How scared he had been the first time he tasted the honey! Scared that his precious booty would burn his tongue for ever and he would lose his voice. But that fear had proved groundless. The honey did burn your mouth like red-hot coals, but the pain passed off – and if you bore it long enough, then afterwards you could speak to fire, even with a mere human tongue. The effect of a tiny piece lasted for five or six months, sometimes almost a year. Just a soft whisper in the language of the flames, a snap of your fingers, and sparks would leap crackling from dry wood, damp wood, even stone.

At first the fire licked up from the twigs more reluctantly than it had in the old days – as if it couldn't really believe he was back. But then it began to whisper and welcomed him more and more exuberantly, until he had to rein in those wildly leaping flames, imitating the sound of their crackling until the fire sank lower, like a wildcat that will crouch down and purr if you stroke its fur carefully enough.

While the fire devoured the wood and its light kept the wolves away, Dustfinger found himself thinking of the boy again. He couldn't count the many nights when he'd had to tell Farid how fire spoke, for the boy knew only mute and sullen flames. 'Heavens above,' he muttered to himself as he warmed his fingers over the glowing embers, 'you're still missing him!' He was glad that the marten at least was still with the boy, to keep him company as he faced the ghosts he saw everywhere.

Yes, Dustfinger did miss Farid. But there were others whom he had been missing for ten long years, missing them so much that his heart was still sore with longing. It was with those people crowding his mind that he strode out, more impatiently with every passing hour, as he approached the outskirts of the forest and what lay beyond it – the world of humans. It was not just his longing for fairies, little glass men and water-nymphs that had tormented him in the other world, nor his desire to be back in the silence under the trees. There weren't many human

beings he had missed, but he had missed those few all the more fiercely.

He had tried so hard to forget them since the day he came, half-starved, to Silvertongue's door, and Silvertongue had explained that there could be no way back for him. It was then he had realized that he must choose. Forget them, Dustfinger – how often he had told himself that! – forget them, or the loss of them all will drive you mad. But his heart simply did not obey. Memories, so sweet and so bitter ... they had both nourished and devoured him for so many years. Until a time came when they began to fade, turning faint and blurred, only an ache to be quickly pushed away because it went to your heart. For what was the use of remembering all you had lost?

Better not remember now either, Dustfinger told himself as the trees around him became younger and the canopy of leaves above grew lighter. Ten years – it's a long time, and many may be lost and gone by now.

Charcoal-burners' huts appeared among the trees more and more often now, but Dustfinger did not let the soot-blackened men see him. Outside the forest, people spoke of them slightly, for the charcoal-burners lived deeper in the forest than most dared to go. Craftsmen, peasants, traders, princes: they all needed charcoal, but they didn't like to see the men who burned it for them in their own towns and villages. Dustfinger liked the charcoal-burners, who knew almost as much about the forest as he did, although they made enemies of the trees daily. He had sat by their fires often enough, listening to their stories, but after all these years there were other stories he wanted to hear, tales of what had been going on outside the forest, and there was only one place to hear those: in one of the inns that stood along the road.

Dustfinger had one particular inn in mind. It lay on the northern outskirts of the forest, where the road appeared among the trees and began to wind uphill, past a few isolated

farms, until it reached the city gate of Ombra, the capital city of Lombrica, the Laughing Prince's realm.

The inns on the road outside Ombra had always been places where the strolling players called the Motley Folk met. They offered their skills there to rich merchants, tradesmen and craftsmen, for weddings and funerals, for festivities to celebrate a traveller's safe return or the birth of a child. They would provide music, earthy jokes and conjuring tricks for just a few coins, taking the audience's minds off their troubles large and small. And if Dustfinger wanted to find out what had been happening in all the years he was away, then the Motley Folk were the people to ask. The players were the newspapers of this world. No one knew what went on in it better than these travellers who were never at home anywhere.

Who knows, thought Dustfinger as he walked down the road, with the autumn sun, by now low in the sky, on his face. If I'm lucky I may even meet old acquaintances.

The road was muddy and full of puddles. Cartwheels had made deep ruts in it, and the hoofprints left by oxen and horses were full of rainwater. At this time of year it sometimes rained for days on end, as it had yesterday, when he had been glad to be under the trees where the leaves caught the rain before it drenched him to the skin. The night had been cold, all the same, and his clothes were clammy even though he had slept beside his fire. He was glad that the sky was clear today, apart from a few shreds of cloud drifting over the hills.

Luckily he had found a few coins in his old clothes. He hoped they would be enough for a bowl of soup. Dustfinger had brought nothing with him from the other world. What would he do here with the printed paper they used for money in that world? Only gold, silver and ringing copper counted in this one, with the local prince's head on the coins if possible. As soon as his money was gone he'd have to look for a market place where he could perform, in Ombra or elsewhere.

The inn that was his destination hadn't changed much in the last few years, either for better or for worse. It was as shabby as ever, with a few windows that were hardly more than holes in the grey stone walls. In the world where he had been living until three days ago, it was unlikely that any guests at all would have crossed such a grubby threshold. But here the inn was the last shelter available before you entered the forest, the last chance of a hot meal and a place to sleep that wasn't damp with dew or rain ... and you got a few lice and bugs thrown in for free, thought Dustfinger as he pushed the door open.

It was so dark in the room inside that his eyes took a little while to adjust to the dim light. The other world had spoilt him with all its lights, with the brightness that made even night into day there. It had accustomed him to seeing everything clearly, to thinking of light as something you could switch on and off, available whenever you wanted. But now his eyes must cope again with a world of twilight and shadows, of long nights as black as charred wood, and houses from which the sunlight was often shut out, because its heat was unwelcome ...

All the light inside the inn came from the few sunbeams falling through the holes that were the windows. Dust-motes danced in them like a swarm of tiny fairies. A fire was burning in the hearth under a battered black cauldron. The smell rising from it was not particularly appetizing, even to Dustfinger's empty stomach, but that didn't surprise him. This inn had never had a landlord who knew the first thing about cooking. A little girl hardly more than ten years old was standing beside the cauldron, stirring whatever was simmering in it with a stick. Some thirty guests were sitting on rough-hewn benches in the dark, smoking, talking quietly and drinking.

Dustfinger strolled over to an empty place and sat down. He surreptitiously looked round for a face that might seem familiar, for a pair of the motley trousers that only the players wore. He immediately saw a lute-player by the window, negotiating with a much better dressed man than the musician

himself, probably a rich merchant. No poor peasant could afford to hire an entertainer, of course. If a farmer wanted music at his wedding he must play the fiddle himself. He couldn't have afforded even the two pipers who were also sitting by the window. At the table next to them, a group of actors were arguing in loud voices, probably about who got the best part in a new play. One still wore the mask behind which he hid when they acted in the towns' market places. He looked strange sitting there among the others, but then all the Motley Folk were strange – with or without masks, whether they sang or danced, performed broad farces on a wooden stage or breathed fire. The same was true of their companions – travelling physicians, bonesetters, stonecutters, miracle healers. The players brought them customers.

Old faces, young faces, happy and unhappy faces: there were all of those in the smoke-filled room, but none of them seemed familiar to Dustfinger. He too sensed he was being scrutinized, but he was used to it. His scarred face attracted glances everywhere, and the clothes he wore did the rest – a fire-eater's costume, black as soot, red as the flames that he played with, but that others feared. For a moment he felt curiously strange amidst all this once-familiar activity, as if the other world still clung to him and could be clearly seen: all the years, the endless years since Silvertongue plucked him out of his own story and stole his life without intending to, as you might crush a snail-shell in passing.

‘Hey, who have we here?’

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder, and a man leaned over him and stared at his face. His hair was grey, his face round and beardless, and he was so unsteady on his feet that for a moment Dustfinger thought he was drunk. ‘Why, if I don't know that face!’ cried the man incredulously, grasping Dustfinger's shoulder hard, as if to make sure it was really flesh and blood. ‘So where've you sprung from, my old fire-eating friend? Straight from the realm of the dead? What happened? Did the

fairies bring you back to life? They always were besotted with you, those little blue imps.'

A few men turned to look at them, but there was so much noise in the dark, stuffy room that not many people noticed what was going on.

'Cloud-Dancer!' Dustfinger straightened up and embraced the other man. 'How are you?'

'Ah, and there was I thinking you'd forgotten me!' Cloud-Dancer gave a broad grin, baring large, yellow teeth.

Oh no, Dustfinger had not forgotten him – although he had tried to, as he had tried to forget the others he had missed. Cloud-Dancer, the best tightrope-walker who ever strolled around the rooftops. Dustfinger had recognized him at once, in spite of his now grey hair and the left leg that was skewed at such a curiously stiff angle.

'Come along, we must drink to this. You don't meet a dead friend again every day.' He impatiently drew Dustfinger over to a bench under one of the windows. A little sunlight fell through it from outside. Then he signalled to the girl who was still stirring the cauldron, and ordered two goblets of wine. The little creature stared at Dustfinger's scars for a moment, fascinated, and then scurried over to the counter. A fat man stood behind it, watching his guests with dull eyes.

'You're looking good!' remarked Cloud-Dancer. 'Well-fed, not a grey hair on your head, hardly a hole in your clothes. You even still have all your teeth, by the look of it. Where've you been? Maybe I should set out for the same place myself – seems like a man can live pretty well there.'

'Forget it. It's better here.' Dustfinger pushed back the hair from his forehead and looked round. 'That's enough about me. How have you been yourself? You can afford wine, but your hair is grey, and your left leg ...'

'Ah, yes, my leg.' The girl brought their wine. As Cloud-Dancer searched his purse for the right money, she stared at

Dustfinger again with such curiosity that he rubbed his fingertips together and whispered a few fire-words. Reaching out his forefinger, he smiled at her and blew gently on the fingertip. A tiny flame, too weak to light a fire but just bright enough to be reflected in the little girl's eyes, flickered on his nail and spat out sparks of gold on the dirty table. The child stood there enchanted, until Dustfinger blew the flame out and dipped his finger in the goblet of wine that Cloud-Dancer pushed over to him.

‘So you still like playing with fire,’ said Cloud-Dancer, as the girl cast an anxious glance at the fat landlord and hurried back to the cauldron. ‘My own games are over now, sad to say.’

‘What happened?’

‘I fell off the rope, I don't dance in the clouds any more. A market trader threw a cabbage at me – I expect I was distracting his customers' attention. At least I was lucky enough to land on a cloth-merchant's stall. That way I broke my leg and a couple of ribs, but not my neck.’

Dustfinger looked at him thoughtfully. ‘Then how do you make a living now you can't walk the tightrope?’

Cloud-Dancer shrugged. ‘Believe it or not, I can still go about on foot. I can even ride with this leg of mine – if there's a horse available. I earn my living as a messenger, although I still like to be with the strolling players, listening to their stories and sitting by the fire with them. But it's words that nourish me now, even though I can't read. Threatening letters, begging letters, love letters, sales contracts, wills – I deliver anything that can be written on a piece of parchment or paper. And I can be relied upon to carry a spoken message too, when it's been whispered into my ear in confidence. I make quite a good living, although I'm not the fastest messenger money can hire. But everyone who gives me a letter to deliver knows that it really will reach the person it's meant for. And a guarantee of that is hard to find.’

Dustfinger believed him. *For a few gold pieces you can read the Prince's own letters*, that was what they used to say even in his own time. You just had to know someone who was good at forging broken seals. 'How about our other friends?' Dustfinger looked at the pipers by the window. 'What are they doing?'

Cloud-Dancer took a sip of wine and pulled a face. 'Ugh! I should have asked for honey in this. The others, well,' he rubbed his stiff leg, 'some are dead, some have just disappeared like you. Look over there, behind the farmer staring so gloomily into his tankard,' he said, jerking his head at the counter. 'There's our old friend Sootbird, with a laugh fixed on his face like a tattoo, the worst fire-eater for miles around, although he still tries to copy you and wonders why fire would rather dance for you than him.'

'He'll never find out.' Dustfinger glanced surreptitiously at the other fire-eater. As far as he remembered, Sootbird could juggle burning torches well enough, but fire didn't dance for him. He was like a hopeless lover rejected again and again by the girl of his choice. Long ago, feeling sorry for the man's futile efforts, Dustfinger had given him some fire-elves' honey, but even with its aid Sootbird hadn't understood what the flames were telling him.

'I've heard that he works with powders bought from alchemists now,' Cloud-Dancer whispered across the table, 'and that's an expensive pastime, if you ask me. The fire bites him so often that his hands and arms are quite red from it. But he doesn't let it get at his face. Before he performs he smears it with grease until it shines like bacon fat.'

'Does he still drink after every show?'

'After the show, before the show, but he's still a good-looking fellow, don't you think?'

Yes, so he was, with his friendly, ever-smiling face. Sootbird was one of those entertainers who lived on the glances of others, on laughter and applause, on knowing that people will

stop to look at them. Even now he was entertaining the others who were leaning against the counter with him. Dustfinger turned his back; he didn't want to see the old mixture of admiration and envy in the other man's eyes. Sootbird was not one of those he had missed.

'You mustn't think times are any easier now for the Motley Folk,' said Cloud-Dancer across the table, low-voiced. 'Since Cosimo's death the Laughing Prince doesn't let the likes of us into the markets except on feast days, and as for going up to the castle itself, that's only when his grandson demands entertainers loudly enough. Not a very nice little boy – he's already ordering his servants about and threatening them with whipping and the pillory. Still, he loves the Motley Folk.'

'Cosimo the Fair is dead?' Dustfinger nearly choked on the sour wine.

'Yes.' Cloud-Dancer leaned over the table, as if it wasn't right to speak of death and misfortune in too loud a voice. 'He rode away scarcely a year ago, beautiful as an angel, to prove his princely courage and finish off the fire-raisers who were haunting the forest then. You may remember their leader, Capricorn?'

Dustfinger had to smile. 'Oh yes. I remember him,' he said quietly.

'He disappeared about the same time you did, but his gang carried on the same as ever. Firefox became their new leader. There wasn't a village nor a farm this side of the forest that was safe from them. So Cosimo rode away to put an end to their evil deeds. He smoked out the whole band, but he didn't come home himself. Since then, his father, who used to like eating so much that his breakfast alone could have fed three whole villages, has become known as the Prince of Sighs too. For the Laughing Prince does nothing but sigh these days.'

Dustfinger held his fingers in the dust-motes dancing above him in the sun. 'The Prince of Sighs!' he murmured. 'Well, well.'

And what about His Noble Highness on the other side of the forest?’

‘The Adderhead?’ Cloud-Dancer looked round uneasily. ‘Hm, well, I’m afraid *he’s* not dead yet. Still thinks himself lord of the whole world. When his game wardens find a peasant in the forest with a rabbit he has the man blinded, he enslaves folk who don’t pay their taxes and makes them dig the ground for silver until they’re coughing up blood. The gallows outside his castle are always in use, and he likes to see a pair of motley trousers dangling there best of all. Still, few speak ill of him, because he has more spies than this inn has bedbugs, and he pays them well. But you can’t bribe Death,’ added Cloud-Dancer softly, ‘and the Adderhead is growing old. It’s said that he’s afraid of the White Women these days, and terrified of dying, so terrified that he falls to his knees by night and howls like a beaten dog. And they say his cooks have to make him calves’ blood pudding every morning, because that’s supposed to keep a man young, and he keeps a hanged man’s finger-bone under his pillow to protect him from the White Women. He’s married four times in the last seven years. His wives get younger and younger, but still none of them has given him what he wants most dearly.’

‘So the Adderhead has no son yet?’

Cloud-Dancer shook his head. ‘No, but all the same his grandson will rule us some day, because the old fox married one of his daughters off to Cosimo the Fair – Violante, known to everyone as Her Ugliness – and she had a son by Cosimo before he went away to die. They say her father made her acceptable to the Laughing Prince by giving her a valuable manuscript to take for her dowry – and the best illuminator at his court into the bargain. Yes, the Laughing Prince was once as keen on written papers as on good food, but now his precious books are mouldering away! Nothing interests him any more, least of all his subjects. There are rumours that it’s all gone exactly as the Adderhead planned, and that he himself made sure his son-in-

law would never return from Capricorn's fortress, so that his grandson could succeed to the throne.'

'The rumours are probably true.' Dustfinger looked at the crowd in the stuffy room. Strolling pedlars, physicians, journeymen craftsmen, players with darned sleeves. One man had an unhappy-looking brownie sitting on the floor beside him. Many looked as if they didn't know how they were going to pay for the wine they were drinking. There were few happy faces to be seen here, few faces free of care, sickness and resentment. Well, what had he expected? Had he hoped that misfortune would have stolen away while he was gone? No. He had wanted to come back – that was all he'd hoped for in ten long years – not back to paradise, he'd just wanted to come home. Doesn't a fish want to be back in the water, even if there's a perch lying in wait for it?

A drunk staggered against the table and almost spilled the wine. Dustfinger reached for the jug. 'And what about Capricorn's men? Firefox and the rest? Are they all dead?'

'In your dreams!' Cloud-Dancer laughed bitterly. 'All the fire-raisers who escaped Cosimo's attack were welcomed to the Castle of Night with open arms. The Adderhead made Firefox his herald, and these days the Piper, Capricorn's old minstrel, sings his dark songs in the Castle of Silver Towers. He wears silk and velvet, and his pockets are full of gold.'

'The Piper's still around?' Dustfinger passed his hand over his face. 'Heavens, have you no good news at all to tell me? Something to make me glad to be home again?'

Cloud-Dancer laughed, so loudly that Sootbird turned and glanced at him. 'The best news is that you're back!' he said. 'We've missed you, Master of the Fire! They say the fairies sigh as they dance by night, since you left us so faithlessly, and the Black Prince tells his bear stories about you before falling asleep.'

‘So the Prince is still around too? Good.’ Relieved, Dustfinger took a sip of the wine, although it really did taste vile. He hadn’t dared to ask about the Prince, for fear he might hear something like Cosimo’s sad story.

‘Oh, he’s doing fine!’ Cloud-Dancer raised his voice as two pedlars at the next table began to quarrel. ‘Still the same – black as pitch, quick with his tongue and even quicker with his knife, never seen without his bear.’

Dustfinger smiled. Yes, this was good news indeed. The Black Prince: bear-tamer, knife-thrower, probably still fretting angrily at the way of the world. Dustfinger had known him since they were both homeless, orphaned children. At the age of eleven they’d stood side by side in the pillory over on the far side of the forest, where they were born, and they’d still smelled of rotten vegetables two days later. They had both been born in Argenta, the Silver Land, the realm of the Adderhead.

Cloud-Dancer looked at his face. ‘Well?’ he asked. ‘When are you finally going to ask the question you’ve been wanting to ask since I clapped you on the shoulder? Go on! Before I’m too drunk to answer you.’

Dustfinger had to smile; he couldn’t help it. Cloud-Dancer had always known how to see into other people’s hearts, though you might not have thought so from his face. ‘Very well. What shall I ... how is she?’

‘At last!’ Cloud-Dancer smiled with such self-satisfaction that two gaps in his teeth showed. ‘Well, first, she’s still very beautiful. Lives in a house now, doesn’t sing and dance any more, doesn’t wear brightly coloured skirts, pins up her hair like a farmer’s wife. She tends a plot of land up on the hill behind the castle, growing herbs for the physicians. Even Nettle buys from her. She lives on that, sometimes well, sometimes not so well, bringing up her children.’

Dustfinger tried to look indifferent, but Cloud-Dancer’s smile told him that he wasn’t succeeding. ‘What about that spice

merchant who was always after her?’

‘What about him? He left years ago, he’s probably living in some big house by the sea, growing richer with every sack of pepper his ships bring in.’

‘Then she didn’t marry him?’

‘No. She chose another man.’

‘Another man?’ Once again Dustfinger tried to sound indifferent, and once again he failed.

Cloud-Dancer enjoyed keeping him in suspense for a while, and then went on. ‘Yes, another man. He soon died, poor fellow, but she has a child by him, a boy.’

Dustfinger said nothing, listening to his own thudding heart. His stupid heart. ‘What about the girls?’

‘Oh, the girls. Yes, them – I wonder who their father can have been?’ Cloud-Dancer was smiling again, like a little boy who has pulled off a mischievous trick. ‘Brianna’s as lovely as her mother already. Although she’s inherited your red hair.’

‘And Rosanna, the younger?’ Her hair was dark, like her mother’s.

The smile on Cloud-Dancer’s face disappeared as if Dustfinger had wiped it away. ‘The child has been dead a long time,’ he said softly. ‘There was a fever, two winters after you went away. Many died of it. Even Nettle couldn’t help them.’

Dustfinger drew bright, damp lines on the table with his forefinger, which was sticky from the wine. Dead. Much might be lost in the space of ten years. For a moment he tried desperately to remember her face, such a little face, but it blurred, as if he had spent too long over the attempt to forget it.

Amidst all the noise, Cloud-Dancer sat with him in silence for a long time. Then at last he rose, ponderously; it wasn’t easy to get up from the low bench with his stiff leg. ‘I must be off, my friend,’ he said. ‘I still have three letters to deliver, two of them up there in Ombra. I want to be at the city gate before dark, or

the guards will have their little joke again and refuse to let me in.'

Dustfinger was still drawing lines on the dark wood of the table. *Two winters after you went away* – the words stung like nettles in his head. 'Where are the others camping at the moment?'

'Just outside the city wall of Ombra. Our prince's beloved grandson celebrates his birthday soon. Every entertainer and minstrel is welcome at the castle on that day.'

Dustfinger nodded without raising his head. 'I'll see. Maybe I'll go along too.' He abruptly rose from the hard bench. The girl by the hearth looked at them. His younger daughter would have been about her age now if the fever hadn't carried her off.

Together with Cloud-Dancer, he made his way past the crowded benches and chairs to the door. It was still fine outside, a sunny autumn day, clad in bright foliage like a strolling player.

'Come to Ombra with me!' Cloud-Dancer laid a hand on his shoulder. 'My horse will carry two, and we can always find a place to sleep there.'

But Dustfinger shook his head.

'Later,' he said, looking down the muddy road. 'It's time I paid a visit.'



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7

Meggie's Decision

The idea hovered and shivered delicately, like a soap bubble, and she dared not even look at it directly in case it burst. But she was familiar with the way of ideas, and she let it shimmer, looking away, thinking about something else.

Philip Pullman,
Northern Lights

Mo came home just as they were all sitting down to breakfast, and Resa kissed him as if he'd been away for weeks. Meggie hugged him harder than usual too, relieved that he had come back safe and sound, but she avoided looking him straight in the eye. Mo knew her too well. He would have spotted her guilty conscience at once. And Meggie's conscience was very guilty.

The reason was the sheet of paper hidden among her school books up in her room, closely written in her own hand, although the words were by someone else. Meggie had spent hours copying out what Orpheus had written. Every time she got something wrong she had begun again from the beginning, for fear that a single mistake could spoil everything. She had added just three words – where the passage mentioned a boy, in the sentences left unread by Orpheus, Meggie had added 'and

the girl'. Three nondescript, perfectly ordinary words, so ordinary that it was overwhelmingly likely that they occurred somewhere in the pages of *Inkheart*. She couldn't check, however, because the only copy of the book she would have needed to do that was now in Basta's hands. Basta ... the mere sound of his name reminded Meggie of black days and black nights. Black with fear.

Mo had brought her a present to make peace between them, as he always did when they had quarrelled: a small notebook bound by himself, just the right size for her jacket pocket, with a marbled paper cover. Mo knew how much Meggie liked marbled patterns; she had been only nine when he had taught her how to colour them for herself. Guilt went to her heart when he put the notebook down by her plate, and for a moment she wanted to tell him everything, just as she had always done. But a glance from Farid prevented her. That glance said, 'No, Meggie, he won't let you go there – ever.' So she kept quiet, kissed Mo, whispered, 'Thank you,' and said no more, quickly bending her head, her tongue heavy with the words she hadn't spoken.

Luckily no one noticed her sad expression. The others were still anxious about Farid's news of Basta. Elinor had gone to the police, on Mo's advice, but her visit to them had done nothing to improve her mood.

'Just as I told you,' she said crossly, working away at the cheese with her knife as if it were the cause of all this trouble. 'Those fools didn't believe a word I said. A couple of sheep in uniform would have listened better. You know I don't like dogs, but maybe I ought to get some after all ... a couple of huge black brutes to tear Basta apart the moment he comes through my garden gate. A Dobsterman dog, yes. A Dobsterman or two. Isn't a Dobsterman the dog that eats people?'

'You mean a Dobermann.' Mo winked across the table at Meggie.

It broke her heart. There he was winking at her, his deceitful daughter who was planning to go right away, to a place where he probably couldn't follow her. Perhaps her mother would understand, but Mo? No, not Mo. Never.

Meggie bit her lip so hard that it hurt, while Elinor, still in a state of agitation, went on. 'And I could hire a bodyguard. You can do that, can't you? One with a pistol – no, not just a pistol, armed to the teeth: knives, guns, everything, and so big that Basta's black heart would stop at the mere sight of him! How does that sound?'

Meggie saw Mo suppress a smile with difficulty. 'How does it sound? As if you'd been reading too many thrillers, Elinor.'

'Well, I *have* read a lot of thrillers,' she said, injured. 'They're very informative if you don't usually mix much with criminals. What's more, I can't forget seeing Basta's knife at your throat.'

'Nor can I, believe me.' Meggie saw his hand go to his throat as if, just for a moment, he felt the sharp blade against his skin again. 'All the same, I think you're worrying unnecessarily. I had plenty of time to think it all over on the drive back, and I don't believe Basta will come all the way here just to get revenge. Revenge for what? For being saved from Capricorn's Shadow – and by us? No. He'll have had this Orpheus read him back by now. Back into the book. Basta never liked our world half as much as Capricorn did. Some things about it made him very nervous.'

He spread jam on top of his bread and cheese. Elinor watched this, as usual, with horror, and Mo, also as usual, ignored her disapproving glance.

'So what about those threats he shouted after the boy?'

'Well, he was angry that he'd got away, wasn't he? I don't have to tell you the kind of thing Basta says when he's angry. I'm only surprised he was actually clever enough to find out that Dustfinger had the book. And I'd like to know where he

found this man Orpheus too. He seems to be better than me at reading aloud.'

'Nonsense!' Elinor's voice sounded cross, but relieved too. 'The only one who may be as good at it as you are is your daughter.'

Mo smiled at Meggie and put another slice of cheese on top of the jam. 'Thanks, very flattering. But, however that may be, our knife-happy friend Basta has gone! And I hope he's taken the wretched book with him, and put an end to that story for ever. There'll be no more need for Elinor to jump when she hears something rustling in the garden at night, and Darius won't have to dream of Basta's knife – which means that the news Farid has brought is in fact very good news! I hope you've all thanked him warmly!'

Farid smiled shyly as Mo raised his coffee cup to him, but Meggie saw the anxiety in his black eyes. If Mo was right, then by now Basta was in the same place as Dustfinger. And they all thought Mo *was* right. You could see the relief in Darius's and Elinor's faces, and Resa put her arms around Mo's neck and smiled as if everything was fine again.

Elinor began asking Mo questions about the books he had so shockingly abandoned to answer Meggie's phone call. And Darius was trying to tell Resa about the new system of classification he had thought up for Elinor's library. But Farid looked at his empty plate. Against the background of its white china, he was probably seeing Basta's knife at Dustfinger's neck.

Basta. The name stuck in Meggie's throat like a pebble. She kept thinking the same thing: if Mo was right, Basta was now where she soon hoped to be herself. In the Inkworld.

She was going to try it that very night, she would try to use her own voice and Orpheus's words to make her way through the thicket of written letters, into the Wayless Wood. Farid had pleaded with her to wait no longer. He was beside himself with anxiety for Dustfinger, and Mo's remarks had certainly done

nothing to change that. 'Please, Meggie!' He had begged her again and again. 'Please read it!'

Meggie looked across the table at Mo. He was whispering something to Resa, and she laughed. You heard her voice only when she laughed. Mo put his arm round her, and his eyes sought Meggie. When her bed was empty tomorrow morning he wouldn't look as carefree as he did now. Would he be angry, or merely sad? Resa laughed when, for her and Elinor's benefit, he mimicked the horror of the collector whose books he had abandoned so disgracefully when Meggie had phoned, and Meggie had to laugh too when he imitated the poor man's voice. The collector had obviously been very fat and breathless.

Elinor was the only one who didn't laugh. 'I don't think that's funny, Mortimer,' she said sharply. 'Personally, I'd probably have shot you if you'd simply gone off leaving my poor books behind, all sick and dirty.'

'Yes, I expect you would.' Mo gave Meggie a conspiratorial look, as he always did when Elinor lectured him or his daughter on the way to treat books or the rules of her library.

Oh Mo, if only you knew, thought Meggie, if only you knew ... She felt as if he would read her secret in her face any minute now. Abruptly, she pushed her chair back, muttered, 'I'm not hungry,' and went off to Elinor's library. Where else? Whenever she wanted to escape her own thoughts, she went to books for help. She was sure to find something to keep her mind occupied until evening finally came and they all went to bed, suspecting nothing.

Looking at Elinor's library, you couldn't tell that scarcely more than a year ago it had contained nothing but a red rooster hanging dead in front of empty shelves, while Elinor's finest books burned on the lawn outside. The jar that Elinor had filled with some of their pale ashes still stood beside her bed.

Meggie ran her forefinger over the backs of the books. They were ranged side by side on the shelves again now, like piano

keys. Some shelves were still empty, but Elinor and Darius were always out and about, visiting second-hand bookshops and auctions, to replace those lost treasures with new and equally wonderful books.

Orpheus ... where was the story of Orpheus?

Meggie was on her way over to the shelf where the Greeks and Romans whispered their ancient stories when the library door opened behind her, and Mo came in.

‘Resa says you have the sheet of paper that Farid brought with him in your room. Can I see it?’ He was trying to sound as casual as if he were just asking about the weather, but he’d never been any good at pretending. Mo couldn’t pretend, any more than he could tell lies.

‘Why?’ Meggie leaned against Elinor’s books as if they would strengthen her backbone.

‘Why? Because I’m curious, remember? And what’s more,’ he added, looking at the backs of the books, as if he could find the right words there, ‘and what’s more, I think it would be better to burn that sheet of paper.’

‘Burn it?’ Meggie looked at him incredulously. ‘But why?’

‘I know it sounds as if I’m seeing ghosts,’ he said, taking a book off the shelf, opening it and leafing absent-mindedly through it, ‘but that piece of paper, Meggie ... I feel it’s like an open door, a door that we’d be well advised to close once and for all. Before Farid tries disappearing into that damn story too.’

‘What if he does?’ Meggie couldn’t help the cool note that crept into her voice. As if she were talking to a stranger. ‘Why can’t you understand? He only wants to find Dustfinger! To warn him against Basta.’

Mo closed the book he had taken off the shelf and put it back in its place. ‘So he says. But suppose Dustfinger didn’t actually want to take him along, suppose he left him behind on purpose? Would that surprise you?’

No. No, it wouldn't. Meggie said nothing. It was so quiet among the books, so terribly quiet among all those words.

'I know, Meggie,' said Mo at last, in a low voice. 'I know you think the world that book describes is much more exciting than this one. I understand the feeling. I've often imagined being right inside one of my favourite books. But we both know that once imagination turns to reality things feel quite different. You think the Inkworld is a magical place, a world of wonders – but believe me, your mother has told me a lot about it that you wouldn't like at all. It's a cruel, dangerous place, full of darkness and violence, ruled by brute force, Meggie, not by justice.'

He looked at her, searching her face for the understanding he had always found there before, but did not find now.

'Farid comes from a world like that,' said Meggie. 'And he didn't choose to get into this story of ours. You brought him here.'

She regretted her words the moment they were out. Mo turned away as if she had struck him. 'Yes. You're right, of course,' he said, going back to the door. 'And I don't want to quarrel with you again. But I don't want that paper lying about your room either. Give it back to Farid. Or else, who knows, there could be a giant sitting on your bed tomorrow morning.' He was trying to make her laugh, of course. He couldn't bear the two of them to be on bad terms again. He looked so depressed. And so tired.

'You know perfectly well nothing like that can happen,' said Meggie. 'Why do you always worry so much? Things don't just come out of the words on the page unless you call them. You should know that better than anyone!'

His hand was still on the door-handle.

'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, no doubt you're right. But do you know what? Sometimes I'd like to put a padlock on all the books in this world. And as for that very special book ... I'd be glad,

now, if Capricorn really had burned the last copy back there in his village. That book brings bad luck, Meggie, nothing but bad luck, even if you won't believe me.'

Then he closed the library door after him.

Meggie stood there motionless until his footsteps had died away. She went over to one of the windows looking out on to the garden, but when Mo finally came down the path leading to his workshop he didn't look back at the house. Resa was with him. She had put her arm round his shoulders, and her other hand was tracing words, but Meggie couldn't make them out. Were they talking about her?

It was sometimes an odd feeling suddenly to have not just a father, but two parents who talked to each other when she wasn't with them. Mo went into his workshop alone, and Resa strolled back to the house. She waved to Meggie when she saw her standing at the window, and Meggie waved back.

An odd feeling ...

Meggie sat among Elinor's books for some time longer, looking first at one, then at another, searching for passages to drown out her own thoughts. But the letters on the pages remained just letters, forming neither pictures nor words, and finally Meggie went out into the garden, lay down on the grass and looked at the workshop. She could see Mo at work through its windows.

I can't do it, she thought, as the wind blew leaves off the trees and whirled them away like brightly painted toys. No. I can't! They'll all be so worried, and Mo will never, ever say a word to me again.

Meggie thought all those things; she thought them over and over again. And at the same time she knew, deep down inside her, that she had made up her mind long ago.



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8

The Minstrel Woman

The minstrel must go on his way,
As he has done so long,
And so a note of sad farewell
Lingers around his song.
Ah, will I e'er come back again?
My dear, alas, who knows?
The heavy hand of death is laid
On many a budding rose.

E. von Monsterberg,
quoted from
Musikanten, Gaukler und Vaganten

It was just getting light when Dustfinger reached the farm that Cloud-Dancer had described to him. It lay on a south-facing slope, surrounded by olive trees. The soil, said Cloud-Dancer, was poor and stony there, but it suited the herbs that Roxane grew. The house stood alone, with no village nearby to protect it. There was only a wall, hardly chest-high, and a wooden gate. You could see the rooftops of Ombra in the distance, the castle towers rising high above the houses, and the road winding towards the city gate – so near, and yet too far to be a refuge if highwaymen or soldiers coming home from war thought it a good idea to loot this lonely farm, where only a woman and two children lived.

Perhaps at least she has a farm-hand, thought Dustfinger as he stood behind some bushes of broom. Their branches hid him, but he had a good view of the house.

It was small, like most farmhouses – not as poor as many of them, but not much better either. The whole house would have fitted a dozen times over and more into one of the great halls where Roxane had once danced. Even the Adderhead used to invite her to his castle, poorly as he thought of the Motley Folk, for in those days everyone had wanted to hear her sing. Rich traders, the miller down by the river, the spice merchant who had sent her presents for more than a year ... so many men had wanted to marry her, had given her jewellery and costly dresses, offered her fine apartments in their houses, and every one of those apartments was certainly larger than the little house where she lived now. But Roxane had stayed with the Motley Folk. She had never been one of those women among the strolling players who would sell their voices and their bodies to a lord and master for a little security, a settled home ...

However, the day had come when she, too, had tired of travelling and had wanted a home for herself and her children. For no law protected those who lived on the road, and that meant the Motley Folk as well as robbers and highwaymen. If you stole from a player you need not fear any punishment, if you did violence to one of their women you could safely go back to your comfortable home, and even if you killed a traveller you need not fear the hangman. All his widow could do in revenge was strike the killer's shadow as the sun cast it on the city wall, only his shadow, and she had to pay for her husband's funeral too. The Motley Folk were fair game. People called them the Devil's decoys, they liked to be entertained by them, listened to their songs and stories, watched their clever tricks – and barred their doors and gates to them when evening came. The players had to camp outside towns and villages, outside the protection of the walls, always on the move, envied

for their freedom, yet despised because they served many masters for money and bread.

Not many strolling players ever left the road – the road and the lonely paths. But that was obviously what Roxane had done.

There was a stable beside the house, a barn and a bakehouse, and between them a yard with a well in the middle of it. There was a garden, fenced off to keep chickens and goats from uprooting the young plants, and a dozen narrow fields on the slope beyond. Some had been harvested, while in others the herbs stood high, bushy and heavy with their own seed. The fragrance borne across to Dustfinger on the wind made the morning air both sweet and bitter.

Roxane was kneeling in the farthest field, among plants of flax, comfrey and wild mallow. She seemed to have been at work for a long time already, although the morning mist still hung in the nearby trees. A boy of perhaps seven or eight knelt beside her. Roxane was talking to him and laughing. How often Dustfinger had summoned up her face in his memory, every part of it: her mouth, her eyes, her high forehead. It had been more difficult with every passing year, and with every year the picture had dimmed, desperately as he had tried to remember more clearly. Time had blurred her face and covered it with dust.

Dustfinger took a step forward – and two steps back. He had thought of turning back three times already, of stealing away again as silently as he had come, but he had stayed. A wind blew through the broom bushes, catching him in the back as if to give him fresh heart, and Dustfinger plucked up his courage, pushed the branches aside and walked towards the house and the fields.

The boy saw him first, and a goose rose from the tall grass by the stable and came towards him, cackling and beating her wings. Peasants were not allowed to keep dogs, that was a privilege reserved for princes, but a goose was a reliable guard

too – and just as alarming. But Dustfinger knew how to avoid the gaping beak, and stroked the excited bird's white neck until she folded her wings like a freshly ironed dress and waddled peacefully away, back to her place in the grass.

Roxane had risen to her feet. She wiped the earth off her hands on to her dress and looked at him, just looked. She had indeed pinned her hair up like a farmer's wife, but it was obviously as long as ever and still as black, apart from a few grey strands. Her dress was as brown as the earth where she had been kneeling, no longer brightly coloured like the skirts she used to wear. But her face was still as familiar to Dustfinger as the sight of the sky, more familiar than his own reflection.

The boy picked up the rake lying on the ground beside him. He clutched it with a grimly determined air, as if he were used to protecting his mother from strangers. Clever lad, thought Dustfinger, never trust anyone, certainly not a scar-faced man like me suddenly emerging from the bushes.

What was he going to say when she asked him where he'd been?

Roxane whispered something to the boy, who reluctantly lowered the rake. Suspicion still lingered in his eyes.

Ten years.

He'd often been gone a long time – in the forest, in the towns on the coast, among the isolated villages lying in the hills around – like a fox that visited farmyards only when its stomach rumbled. 'Your heart's a vagabond,' Roxane always said. Sometimes he'd had to search for her when she had moved on with the others. They lived together in the forest for a while, in an abandoned charcoal-burner's hut, and then in a tent with other strolling players. They even managed to hold out within the solid walls of Ombra all one winter. He was always the one who wanted to move on, and when their first daughter was born and Roxane wanted to stay put more often – in some reasonably familiar place, with the other women among the

strolling players, close to the shelter of walls – he would go off alone. But he always came back to her and the children, much to the annoyance of all the rich men who flocked around her wanting to make an honest woman of her.

What had she thought when he stayed away for a whole ten years? Had she, like Cloud-Dancer, thought him dead? Or did she believe he had simply left without a word, without saying goodbye?

He could not find the answer in Roxane's face. He saw bewilderment there, anger, perhaps love too. Perhaps. She whispered something to the boy, took his hand and made him walk beside her. She went slowly, as if she must prevent her feet from going faster. He longed to run to her, leaving one of those years behind him at every step, but he had used up all his courage. He stood there as if rooted to the spot, looking at her as she came towards him after all those years, all the years for which he had no explanation ... except one that she wouldn't believe.

Only a few paces still separated them when Roxane stopped. She put her arm around the boy's shoulder, but he pushed it away. Of course. He didn't want his mother's arm reminding him how young he still was. How proudly she thrust out her chin. That was the first thing he had noticed about Roxane – her pride. He couldn't help smiling, but he bowed his head so that she couldn't see the smile.

'Obviously no living creature can withstand you to this day. My goose has always driven everyone else off.' When Roxane spoke there was nothing special about her voice, none of the strength and beauty it had when she sang.

'Well, nothing's changed there,' he said. 'In all these years.' And suddenly, as he looked at her, he finally, truly knew that he had come home. It was so strong a sensation that he felt weak at the knees. How happy he was to see her again, how

dreadfully, terribly happy! Ask me, he thought. Ask me where I've been. Although he didn't know how he would explain.

But she said only, 'You seem to have been well off, wherever you've been.'

'It only looks like that,' he replied. 'I didn't stay there of my own free will.'

Roxane examined his face as if she had forgotten what it looked like, and stroked the boy's hair. It was as black as hers, but his eyes were the eyes of another. They looked at him coldly. Dustfinger rubbed his hands together and whispered fire-words to his fingers until sparks fell from them like rain. Where they landed on the stony ground flowers sprang up, red flowers, each petal a tongue of flame. The boy stared at them with mingled delight and fear. In the end he crouched down beside them and put his hand out to the fiery flowers.

'Careful!' warned Dustfinger, but it was already too late. The boy, taken by surprise, put his burned fingertips in his mouth.

'So the fire still obeys you,' said Roxane, and for the first time he detected something like a smile in her eyes. 'You look hungry. Come with me.' And without another word she walked towards the house. The boy was still staring at the fiery flowers.

'I've heard you grow herbs for the healers.' Dustfinger stood indecisively in the doorway.

'Yes, even Nettle buys from me.'

Nettle, small as a moss-woman, always surly, sparing of her words as a beggar with his tongue cut out. But there wasn't a better healer in this world.

'Does she still live in the old bear's cave on the outskirts of the forest?' Hesitantly, Dustfinger walked through the doorway. It was so low that he had to duck his head. The smell of freshly baked bread rose to his nostrils. Roxane placed a loaf on the table, brought cheese, oil, olives.

‘Yes, but she isn’t often there. She’s getting more eccentric all the time, she roams the forest talking to the trees and to herself, looking for plants still unknown to her. Sometimes you don’t see her for weeks, so people come to me more and more often these days. Nettle has taught me things these last few years.’ She didn’t look at him as she said that. ‘She’s shown me how to grow herbs in my fields that usually thrive only in the forest. Butterfly clover, jinglebell leaf, and the red anemones where the fire-elves get their honey.’

‘I didn’t know those anemones could be used for healing too.’

‘They can’t. I planted them because they reminded me of someone.’ This time she did look at him.

Dustfinger put out his hand to one of the bunches of herbs hanging from the ceiling, and rubbed the dry flowers between his fingers: lavender, where vipers hide, and helpful if they bite you. ‘I expect they grow here only because you sing for them,’ he said. ‘Didn’t folk always say: when Roxane sings the stones burst into flower?’

Roxane cut some bread, poured oil into a bowl. ‘I sing only for the stones these days,’ she said. ‘And for my son.’ She handed him the bread. ‘Here, eat this. I baked it only yesterday.’ Then, turning her back to him, she went over to the fire. Dustfinger watched her surreptitiously as he dipped a piece of bread into the oil. Two sacks of straw and a couple of blankets on the bed, a bench, a chair, a table, pitchers, baskets, bottles and bowls, bundles of dried herbs under the ceiling, crammed close together the way they used to hang in Nettle’s cave, and a chest that looked strangely fine in this otherwise sparsely furnished room. Dustfinger still remembered the cloth merchant who had given it to Roxane. It was a heavy load for his servants to carry, and it had been full to the brim with silken dresses embroidered with pearls, the sleeves edged with lace. Were they still there in the chest? Unworn, useless for working in the fields?

‘I went to Nettle when Rosanna first fell ill.’ Roxane did not turn to him as she spoke. ‘I didn’t know anything, not even how to draw the fever out of her. Nettle showed me all she knew, but nothing helped our daughter. So I rode to see the Barn Owl with her, while her fever rose higher and higher. I took her into the forest, to the fairies, but they didn’t help me either. They might have done it for you – but you weren’t there.’

Dustfinger saw her pass the back of her hand over her eyes. ‘Cloud-Dancer told me.’ He knew these were not the right words, but he could find no better.

Roxane just nodded, and passed her hand over her eyes again. ‘Some say that you can see the people you love even after death,’ she said quietly. ‘They say the dead visit you by night, or at least in your dreams; your longing for them calls them back, if only for a little while ... Rosanna didn’t come. I went to women who said they could speak to the dead. I burned herbs whose fragrance was supposed to summon her, and I lay awake long nights hoping that she would come back, at least once. But it was all lies. There’s no way back. Or have you been there? Did you find one?’

‘In the realm of the dead? No.’ Dustfinger shook his head with a sad smile. ‘No, I didn’t go quite so far. But believe me, if I had, then even from there I’d have sought some way to get back to you ...’

How long she looked at him! No one else had ever looked at him like that. And once again he tried to find words, the words that could explain where he had been, but there were none.

‘When Rosanna died,’ Roxane’s tongue seemed to shrink from the word, as if it could kill her daughter a second time, ‘when she died and I held her in my arms, I swore something to myself: I swore that never, never again would I be so helpless when death tried to take away someone I love. I’ve learned a great deal since then. Perhaps today I could cure her. Or perhaps not.’

She looked at him again, and when he returned her glance he did not try to hide his pain, as he usually would.

‘Where did you bury her?’

‘Behind the house, where she always used to play.’

He turned to the open door, wanting at least to see the earth under which she lay, but Roxane held him back. ‘Where have you been?’ she whispered, laying her forehead against his chest.

He stroked her hair, stroked the fine grey strands like silken cobwebs running through the sooty black, and buried his face in it. She still mixed a little bitter orange into the water when she washed her hair. Its perfume brought back so many memories that he felt dizzy. ‘Far away,’ he said. ‘I’ve been very, very far away.’ Then he just stood there holding her tightly, unable to believe that she was really there again, not just a figment of his dreams, not just a memory, blurred and vague, but a woman of flesh and blood with fragrant hair ... and she was not sending him away.

How long they simply stood there like that, he didn’t know.

‘What about our older girl? How is Brianna?’ he asked at last.

‘She’s been living up at the castle for four years now. She serves Violante, the Prince’s daughter-in-law, known to everyone as Her Ugliness.’ She came out of his arms, smoothed her pinned-up hair, and reached for his hands. ‘Brianna sings for Violante, looks after her spoilt little son and reads to her,’ she said. ‘Violante adores books, but her eyesight is bad, so she can’t easily read them for herself – let alone that she must do it in secret because the Prince thinks poorly of women who read.’

‘But Brianna can read?’

‘Yes, and I’ve taught my son to read too.’

‘What’s his name?’

‘Jehan. After his father.’ Roxane went over to the table and touched the flowers standing on it.

‘Did I know him?’

‘No. He left me this farm – and a son. The fire-raisers set light to our barn, he ran in to save the livestock, and the fire consumed him. Isn’t it strange – that you can love two men and fire protects one of them, but kills the other?’ She was silent for some time before she spoke again. ‘Firefox was leader of the arsonists then. They were almost worse than under Capricorn. Basta and Capricorn disappeared at the same time as you, did you know?’

‘Yes, so I’ve heard,’ he murmured, unable to take his eyes off her. How lovely she was. How beautiful. It almost hurt to look at her. When she came towards him again every movement reminded him of the day he had first seen her dance.

‘The fairies did very well,’ she said quietly, stroking his face. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d think someone had simply painted those scars on your face with a silver pencil.’

‘A lie, but a kind one,’ he said just as softly. No one knew better than Roxane where the scars came from. They would neither of them forget the day when the Adderhead had commanded her to dance and sing before him. Capricorn had been there too, with Basta and all the other fire-raisers, and Basta had stared at Roxane like a tom-cat eyeing a tasty bird. He had pursued her day after day, promising her gold and jewels, threatening and flattering her, and when she rejected him again and again, alone and in company, Basta made enquiries to discover the identity of the man she preferred to him. He lay in wait for Dustfinger on his way to Roxane, with two other men, who held him down while Basta cut his face.

‘You didn’t marry again after your husband died?’ You fool, he thought, are you jealous of a dead man?

‘No, the only man on this farm is Jehan.’

The boy appeared in the doorway as suddenly as if he had been listening behind it, just waiting for his name to be spoken. Without a word he made his way past Dustfinger and sat down on the bench.

‘The flowers are even bigger now,’ he said.

‘Did you burn your fingers on them?’

‘Only a little.’

Roxane pushed a jug of cold water over to him. ‘Here, dip them in that. And if it doesn’t help I’ll break an egg for you. There’s nothing better for burns than a little egg white.’

Jehan obediently put his fingers in the jug, still looking at Dustfinger. ‘Doesn’t he ever burn himself?’ he asked his mother.

Roxane had to smile. ‘No, never. Fire loves him. It licks his fingers, it kisses him.’

Jehan looked at Dustfinger as if his mother had said that fairy and not human blood ran in his veins.

‘Careful, she’s teasing you!’ said Dustfinger. ‘Of course it bites me too.’

‘Those scars on your face – they weren’t made by fire?’

‘No.’ Dustfinger helped himself to more bread. ‘This woman, Violante,’ he said. ‘Cloud-Dancer told me the Adderhead is her father. Does she hate the strolling players as much as he does?’

‘No.’ Roxane ran her fingers through Jehan’s black hair. ‘If Violante hates anyone, it’s her father himself. She was seven when he sent her here. She was married to Cosimo when she was twelve, and six years later she was a widow. Now there she sits in her father-in-law’s castle, trying to care for his subjects, as he has long neglected to do in his mourning for his son. Violante feels for the weak. Beggars, cripples, widows with hungry children, peasants who can’t pay their taxes – they all go to her, but Violante is a woman. Any power she has is only because everyone’s afraid of her father, even on this side of the forest.’

‘Brianna likes it at the castle.’ Jehan wiped his wet fingers on his trousers and looked at their reddened tips with concern.

Roxane dipped his fingers back in the cold water. ‘Yes, I’m afraid so,’ she said. ‘Our daughter likes to wear Violante’s cast-

off clothes, sleep in a soft four-poster bed, and have the fine folk at court pay her compliments. But I don't care for it, and she knows I don't.'

'The Ugly Lady sends for me too sometimes!' There was no mistaking the pride in Jehan's voice. 'To play with her son. Jacopo pesters her and Brianna when they're reading, and no one else will play with him because he always starts screaming when you have a fight with him ... and when he loses he shouts that he's going to have your head chopped off!'

'You let him play with a prince's brat?' Dustfinger cast Roxane an anxious glance. 'Whatever their age, princes are never friends to anyone. Have you forgotten that? And the same is true of their daughters, especially if the Adderhead is their father.'

Roxane made her way past him in silence. 'You don't have to remind me what princes are like,' she said. 'Your daughter is fifteen years old now, it's a long time since she took any advice from me. But who knows, maybe she'll listen to her father, even if she hasn't seen him for ten years. Next Sunday the Laughing Prince is holding festivities to celebrate his grandson's birthday. A good fire-eater is sure to be welcome at the castle, since Sootbird is the only one they've had to entertain them all these years.' She stopped in the open doorway. 'Come along, Jehan,' she said, 'your fingers don't look too bad, and there's plenty of work still to do.'

The boy obeyed without protest. At the door he cast a last, curious look at Dustfinger, then ran off – and Dustfinger was left alone in the little house. He looked at the pots and pans near the fire, the wooden bowls, the spinning-wheel in the corner and the chest that spoke of Roxane's past. Yes, it was a simple house, not much bigger than a charcoal-burner's hut, but it was a home – something that Roxane had always wanted. She had never liked to have only the sky above her by night ... even if he made the fire grow flowers for her, flowers to watch over her sleep.



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9

Meggie Reads

‘Don’t ask where the rest of this book is!’ It is a shrill cry that comes from an undefined spot among the shelves. ‘All books continue in the beyond ...’

**Italo Calvino,
*If On A Winter’s Night A Traveller***

When all was quiet in Elinor’s house, and the garden was bright in the moonlight, Meggie put on the dress that Resa had made for her. Several months ago, she had asked her mother what kind of clothes women wore in the Inkworld.

‘Which women?’ Resa had enquired. ‘Farmers’ wives? Strolling players? Princes’ daughters? Maidservants?’

‘What did *you* wear?’ Meggie asked, and Resa had gone into the nearest town with Darius and bought some dress material there: plain, coarsely woven red fabric. Then she had asked Elinor to bring the old sewing machine up from the cellar. ‘That’s the sort of dress I wore when I was living in Capricorn’s fortress as a maid,’ her hands had said, putting the finished dress over Meggie’s head. ‘It would have been too fine for a peasant woman, but it was just about good enough for a rich man’s servant, and Mortola was very keen that we shouldn’t be much worse dressed than the Prince’s maids – even if we only served a gang of fire-raisers.’

Meggie stood in front of her wardrobe mirror and examined herself in the dull glass. She looked strange to herself. And she'd be a stranger in the Inkworld too; a dress alone couldn't alter that. A stranger, just as Dustfinger was here, she thought – and she remembered the unhappiness in his eyes. Nonsense, she told herself crossly, pushing back her smooth hair. I'm not planning to spend ten years there.

The sleeves of the dress were already a little too short, and it was stretched tight over her breasts too. 'Good heavens, Meggie!' Elinor had exclaimed when she realized, for the first time, that they weren't as flat as the cover of a book any more. 'Well, I imagine your Pippi Longstocking days are over now!'

They hadn't found anything suitable for Farid to wear, not in the attic or in the trunks of clothes down in the cellar that smelled of mothballs and cigar smoke, but he didn't seem to mind. 'Who cares? If it works we'll start out in the forest,' he said. 'No one will be interested in my jeans there, and as soon as we come to a village or town I'll steal myself something to wear!'

Everything always seemed so simple to him. He couldn't understand that Meggie felt guilty because of Mo and Resa, any more than he understood her anxiety to find the right clothes. When she confessed that she could hardly look Mo and her mother in the eye after deciding to go with him, he had just asked 'Why?', looking at her blankly. 'You're thirteen! Surely they'd be marrying you off to someone quite soon anyway?'

'Marrying me off?' Meggie had felt the blood rise to her face. But how could she talk about such things to a boy out of a story in the *Thousand and One Nights*, where all women were servants or slave-girls – or lived in a harem?

'Anyway,' added Farid, kindly ignoring the fact that she was still blushing, 'you're not intending to stay very long, are you?'

No, she wasn't. She wanted to taste and smell and feel the Inkworld, see fairies and princes – and then come home again

to Mo and Resa, Elinor and Darius. There was just one problem: the words Orpheus had written might take her into Dustfinger's story, but they couldn't bring her back. Only one person could write her back again – Fenoglio, the inventor of the world she wanted to visit, the creator of glass men and blue-skinned fairies, of Dustfinger and Basta too. Yes, only Fenoglio could help her to return. Every time Meggie thought of that, her courage drained away and she felt like cancelling the whole plan, striking out those three little words she had added to what Orpheus had written: '*... and the girl*'.

Suppose she couldn't find Fenoglio, suppose he wasn't even in his own story any more? Oh, come on! He *must* still be there, she told herself whenever that thought made her heart beat faster. He can't simply write himself back, not without someone to read what he's written aloud! But suppose Fenoglio had found another reader there, someone like Orpheus or Darius? The gift didn't seem to be unique, as she and Mo had once thought.

No, he's still there! I'm sure he is! thought Meggie for the hundredth time, reading her goodbye letter to Mo and Resa once more. She herself didn't know why she had chosen to write it on the letterhead that she and Mo had designed together. That was hardly going to mollify him.

Dearest Mo, dear Resa. Meggie knew the words by heart.

Please don't worry. Farid has to find Dustfinger to warn him about Basta, and I'm going too. I won't stay long – I just want to see the Wayless Wood, the Laughing Prince and Cosimo the Fair, and perhaps the Black Prince and Cloud-Dancer. I want to see the fairies again, and the glass men – and Fenoglio. He'll write me back here. You know he can do it, so don't worry. Capricorn isn't in the Inkworld any more, after all.

See you soon, lots of love and kisses, Meggie.

P.S. I'll bring you a book back, Mo. Apparently there are wonderful books there, hand-written books full of pictures, like the

ones in Elinor's glass cases. Only even better. Please don't be angry.

She had torn up this letter and rewritten it three times, but that had made matters no better. Because she knew that there were no words that could stop Mo being angry with her and Resa weeping with anxiety – the way she did the day Meggie came home from school two hours later than usual. She put the letter on her pillow – they couldn't miss seeing it there – and went over to the mirror again. Meggie, she thought, what are you doing? What do you think you're doing? But her reflection did not reply.

When she let Farid into her room just after midnight he was surprised to see her dress. 'I don't have shoes to go with it,' she said. 'But luckily it's quite long, and I don't think my boots show much, do they?'

Farid just nodded. 'It looks lovely,' he murmured awkwardly.

Meggie locked the door after letting him in, and took the key out of the lock so that it could be unlocked again from outside. Elinor had a second key, and though she probably wouldn't be able to find it at first, Darius would know where it was. Meggie glanced at the letter on her pillow once more ...

Over his shoulder, Farid had the rucksack she had found in Elinor's attic. 'Oh, he's welcome to it,' Elinor had said when Meggie asked her. 'It once belonged to an uncle of mine. I hated him! The boy can put that smelly marten in it. I like the idea!'

The marten! Meggie's heart missed a beat.

Farid didn't know why Dustfinger had left Gwin behind, and Meggie hadn't told him, although she knew the reason only too well. She herself, after all, had told Dustfinger what part the marten was to play in his story. He was to die a dreadful, violent death because of Gwin – if what Fenoglio had written came true.

But Farid just shook his head sadly when she asked him about the marten. 'He's gone,' said the boy. 'I tied him up in the garden, because the bookworm woman kept on at me about her

birds, but he gnawed through the rope. I've looked for him everywhere, but I just can't find him!'

Clever Gwin.

'He'll have to stay here,' said Meggie. 'Orpheus didn't write anything about him, and Resa will look after him. She likes him.'

Farid nodded, and glanced unhappily at the window, but he didn't contradict her.

The Wayless Wood – that was where Orpheus's words would take them. Farid knew where Dustfinger had meant to go after arriving in the forest: to Ombra, where the Laughing Prince's castle stood. And that was where Meggie hoped to find Fenoglio too. He had often told her about Ombra when they were both Capricorn's prisoners. One night, when neither of them could sleep because Capricorn's men were shooting at stray cats outside again, he had whispered to Meggie, 'If I could choose to see one place in the Inkworld, then it would be Ombra ... After all, the Laughing Prince is a great lover of books, which can hardly be said of his adversary the Adderhead. Yes, life must surely be good for a writer in Ombra. A room in an attic somewhere, perhaps in the alley where the cobblers and saddlers work – their trades don't smell too bad – and a glass man to sharpen my quills, a few fairies over my bed, and I could look down into the alley through my window and see all life pass by ...'

'What are you taking with you?' Farid's voice startled Meggie out of her thoughts. 'You know we're not supposed to bring too much.'

'Of course I know.' Did he think that just because she was a girl she needed a dozen dresses? All she was going to carry was the old leather bag that had always gone with her and Mo on their travels when she was little. It would remind her of Mo, and she hoped that in the Inkworld it would be as inconspicuous as her dress. But the things she'd stuffed into it

would certainly attract attention if anyone saw them: a hairbrush made of plastic, modern like the buttons on the cardigan she had packed; also a couple of pencils, a penknife, a photograph of her parents and one of Elinor. She had thought hard about what book to take. Going without one would have seemed to her like setting off naked, but it mustn't be a heavy book, so it had to be a paperback. 'Books in beach clothes,' Mo called them, 'badly dressed for most occasions, but useful when you're on holiday.' Elinor didn't have a single paperback on her shelves, but Meggie herself owned a few. In the end she had decided on one that Resa had given her, a collection of stories set near the lake that lay close to Elinor's house. That way she would be taking a little bit of home with her – for Elinor's house was her home now, more than anywhere else had ever been. And who knew, maybe Fenoglio would be able to use the words in it to write her back again, back into her own story ...

Farid had gone to the window. It was open, and a cool wind was blowing into the room, moving the curtains that Resa had made. Meggie shivered in her new dress. The nights were still very mild, but what would the season be in the Inkworld? Perhaps it was winter there ...

'I ought to say goodbye to him, at least,' murmured Farid. 'Gwin!' he called softly into the night air, clicking his tongue.

Meggie quickly pulled him away from the window. 'Don't do that!' she snapped. 'Do you want to wake everyone up? I've already told you, Gwin will be fine here. He's probably found a female marten by now. There are a few around the place. Elinor's always afraid they'll eat the nightingale that sings outside her window in the evening.'

Farid looked very unhappy, but he stepped back from the window. 'Why are you leaving it open?' he asked. 'Suppose Basta ...' He didn't finish his sentence.

'Elinor's alarm system works even if there's an open window,' was all Meggie said, while she put the notebook Mo had given

her in her bag. There was a reason why she didn't want to close the window. One night in a hotel by the sea, not far from Capricorn's village, she had persuaded Mo to read her a poem. A poem about a moon-bird asleep in a peppermint wind. Next morning the bird was fluttering against the window of their hotel bedroom, and Meggie couldn't forget how its little head kept colliding with the glass again and again. Her window must stay open.

'We'd better sit close to each other on the sofa,' she said. 'And sling your rucksack over your back.'

Farid obeyed. He sat down on the sofa as hesitantly as he had on her chair. It was an old, velvet, button-backed sofa with tassels, its pale green upholstery very worn. 'You need somewhere comfortable to sit and read,' Elinor had said when she asked Darius to put it in Meggie's room. What would Elinor say when she found that Meggie had gone? Would she understand? She'll probably swear a lot, thought Meggie, kneeling beside her school bag. And then she'll say, 'Damn it, why didn't the silly girl take me too?' That would be Elinor all over. Meggie suddenly wanted to see her again, but she tried not to think of any of them any more – not Elinor or Resa or Mo. Particularly not Mo, for she might have only too clear an idea of what he'd look like when he found her letter ... no, stop it, she told herself.

She quickly reached into her school bag and took out her geography book. The sheet of paper that Farid had brought with him was in there, beside her own copy of it, but Meggie took out only the copy in her own handwriting. Farid moved aside as she sat down next to him, and for a moment Meggie thought she saw something like fear in his eyes.

'What's the matter?' she asked. 'Have you changed your mind?'

But he shook his head. 'No. It's just ... it hasn't ever happened to you, has it?'

‘What?’ For the first time Meggie noticed that he had a beard coming. It looked odd on his young face.

‘Well, what – what happened to Darius.’

Ah, that was it. He was afraid of arriving in Dustfinger’s world with a twisted face, or a stiff leg, or mute like Resa.

‘No, of course not!’ Meggie couldn’t help the note of injury that crept into her voice. Although – could she really be sure that Fenoglio had arrived unharmed on the other side? Fenoglio, the Steadfast Tin Soldier ... she had never seen people again after sending them away into the letters on the page. She’d seen only those who came *out* of the pages. Never mind. Don’t think so much, Meggie. Read, or you may lose courage before you even feel the first word on your tongue ...

Farid cleared his throat, as if he, and not Meggie, must start reading.

So what was she waiting for? Did she expect Mo to knock on her door and wonder why she had locked it? All had been quiet next door for some time. Her parents were asleep. Don’t think of them, Meggie! Don’t think of Mo or Resa or Elinor, just think of the words – and the place where you want them to take you. A place of marvels and adventures.

Meggie looked at the letters on the page, black and carefully shaped. She tried the taste of the first few syllables on her tongue, tried to picture the world of which the words whispered, the trees, the birds, the strange sky ... Then she began to read. Her heart was thudding almost as violently as it had on the night she had been meant to use her voice to kill. Yet this time she had to do so much less. She had only to open a door, nothing but a door between the words, just large enough for her and Farid to pass through ...

A fresh fragrance rose to her nostrils, the scent of thousands and thousands of leaves. Then everything disappeared: her desk, the lamp beside her, the open window. The last thing that

Meggie saw was Gwin, sitting on the window-sill, snuffling and looking at them.

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The Inkworld

Thus sharply did the terrified three learn the difference between an island of make-believe and the same island come true.

J.M. Barrie,
Peter Pan

It was bright. Sunlight filtered through countless leaves. Shadows danced on a nearby pool, and a swarm of tiny red elves was whirring above the dark water.

I can do it! That was Meggie's first thought when she sensed that the letters on the page really had let her through and she wasn't in Elinor's house any more, but somewhere very, very different. *I can do it. I can read myself into a story.* She really had slipped through the words, as she'd so often done in her mind. But this time she wouldn't have to slip into the skin of a character in the story – no, this time she would be in the story herself, part of it. Her very own self. Meggie. Not even that man Orpheus had done it. He had read Dustfinger home, but he couldn't read himself into the book, right into it. No one but Meggie had ever done it before, not Orpheus, not Darius, not Mo.

Mo.

Meggie looked round almost as if she hoped he might be standing behind her, as usual when they were in a strange place. But only Farid was there, looking around as incredulously as she was. Elinor's house was far, far away. Her parents were gone. And there was no way back.

Quite suddenly, Meggie felt fear rise in her like black, brackish water. She felt lost, terribly lost, felt it in every part of her. She didn't belong here! What had she done?

She stared at the paper in her hand, so useless now, the bait she had swallowed. Fenoglio's story had caught her. The sense of triumph that had carried her away just now was gone as if it had never been. Fear had extinguished it, fear that she had made a terrible mistake and it could never be put right. Meggie tried desperately to find some other feeling in her heart, but there was nothing, not even curiosity about the world now surrounding her. *I want to go back!* That was all she could think.

But Farid turned to her and smiled.

'Look at those trees, Meggie!' he said. 'They really do grow right up to the sky. Look at them!'

He ran his fingers over his face, felt his nose and mouth, looked down at himself, and on realizing that he was obviously entirely unharmed began leaping about like a grasshopper. He made his way over the tree roots that wound through the moss which grew thick and soft between them, jumped from root to root – and then turned round and round, laughing, arms outstretched, until he was dizzy and staggered back against the nearest tree. Still laughing, he leaned against its trunk, which was so vast that five grown men with their arms stretched out could hardly have encompassed it, and looked up into the tangle of twigs and branches.

'You did it, Meggie!' he cried. 'You did it! Hear that, Cheesehead?' he shouted at the trees. 'She can do it, using your words. She can do what you've tried thousands of times! She

can do it and you can't!' He laughed again, as gleefully as a small child. Until he noticed that Meggie was perfectly silent.

'What's the matter?' he asked, indicating her mouth in alarm. 'You haven't ...?'

Lost her voice, like her mother? Had she? Her tongue felt heavy, but the words came out. 'No. No, I'm all right.'

Farid smiled with relief. His carefree mood soothed Meggie's fears, and for the first time she really looked around her. They were in a valley, a broad, densely wooded valley among hills with trees standing so close together on their slopes that the crowns grew into each other. Chestnut and oak on the hillsides, ash and poplar further down, mingling their leaves with the silvery foliage of willows. The Wayless Wood deserved its name. It seemed to have no end and no beginning, like a green sea where you could drown as easily as in the wet and salty waves of its sister the Ocean.

'Isn't this incredible? Isn't it amazingly wonderful?' Farid laughed so exuberantly that an animal of some kind, invisible among the leaves, snarled angrily down at them. 'Dustfinger told me about it, but it's even better than he said. How can there be so many different kinds of leaves? And just look at all the flowers and berries! We won't starve here!' Farid picked a berry, round and blue-black, sniffed it and put it in his mouth. 'I once knew an old man,' he said, wiping the juice from his lips, 'who used to tell stories at night by the fire. Stories about paradise. This is just how he described it: carpets of moss, pools of cool water, flowers and sweet berries everywhere, trees growing up to the sky, and the voices of their leaves speaking to the wind above you. Can you hear them?'

Yes, Meggie could. And she could see elves, swarms of them, tiny creatures with red skins. Resa had told her about them. They were swirling like midges above a pool of water, only a few steps away, which reflected the leaves of the trees. It was

surrounded by bushes that bore red flowers, and the water was covered with their faded petals.

Meggie couldn't see any blue fairies, but she did see butterflies, bees, birds, spiders' webs still silvery with dew although the sun was high in the sky, lizards, rabbits ... there was a rustling and a rushing all around them, a crackling and a scratching and a pulsing, there was a hissing and a cooing and a chirping. This world seemed to be bursting with life, and yet it seemed quiet as well, wonderfully quiet, as if time didn't exist, as if there were no beginning or end to the present moment.

'Do you think he came here too?' Farid looked round wistfully, as if hoping that Dustfinger would appear among the trees at any moment. 'Yes, of course. Orpheus must have read him to this very place, don't you think? He told me about that pool, and the red elves, and the tree over there with the pale bark where you can find their nests. "And then you must follow a stream," he said, "a stream going north. For in the south lies Argenta where the Adderhead rules, and you'll be hanged from a gallows there quicker than you can say your name." But I'd better take a look from up there!' Quick as a squirrel, he climbed a sapling, and before Meggie knew it he had caught hold of a woody vine and was hauling himself up to the top of a gigantic tree.

'What are you doing?' she called after him.

'You can always see more from further up!'

Farid was hardly visible among the branches now. Meggie folded up the sheet of paper with Orpheus's words on it and put it in her bag. She didn't want to see the letters any more; they seemed to her like poisonous beetles, like Alice in Wonderland's bottle saying 'Drink me!' Her fingers touched the notebook with its marbled paper cover, and suddenly she had tears in her eyes.

'When you come to a charcoal-burner's hut, Dustfinger said, then you know you're out of the Wayless Wood.' Farid's voice came down to her like the sound of a strange bird. 'I remember

every word he said. If I want them to, words stick in my memory like flies sticking to resin. I don't need paper to put them on, not me! You just have to find the charcoal-burners and the black patches they leave on the forest floor, he said, and then you know the world of humans isn't far off. Follow the stream that springs from the water-nymphs' pool. It will lead you straight to Lombrica and the Laughing Prince's realm. Soon you'll see his castle on the eastern slope of a hill, high above a river. It's grey as a wasps' nest, and the city is all around it, with a market place where you can breathe fire right up to the sky ...'

Meggie was kneeling among the flowers – violets and purple bellflowers – most of them fading now, but they were still fragrant, and smelled so sweet that she felt dizzy. A wasp was zooming around among them – or did it just look like a wasp? How much had Fenoglio copied from his own world and how much had he made up? It all seemed so familiar and yet so strange.

'Isn't it lucky he told me about everything in such detail?' Meggie saw Farid's bare feet. He was swinging through the leaves at a dizzy height. 'Dustfinger often couldn't sleep at night. He was afraid of his dreams. I used to wake him up when they were bad, and then we sat by the fire and I asked him questions. I do that very well. I'm brilliant at asking questions. You bet I am!'

Meggie couldn't help smiling at the pride in his voice. She looked up at the canopy of foliage, and saw that the leaves were turning colour, as they had been in Elinor's garden too. Did the two worlds keep time with each other? And had they always kept time, or did their stories become inextricably linked only on the day when Mo brought Capricorn, Basta and Dustfinger from one into the other? She would never find out the answer, for who could know?

There was a rustling under one of the bushes, a thorny shrub, heavy with dark berries. Wolves and bears, cats with dappled

fur – Resa had told her about them too. Involuntarily, Meggie stepped back, but her dress caught on some tall thistles white with their own downy seed-heads.

‘Farid?’ she called, cross with herself when she heard the fear in her voice. ‘Farid!’

But he didn’t seem to hear her. He was still chattering away to himself high among the branches, carefree as a bird in the sunshine, while she, Meggie, was down here among the shadows. Shadows that moved, had eyes, growled ... was that a snake? She freed her dress with such a violent tug that it tore, and stumbled further back until she came up against the rough trunk of an oak tree. The snake slid past quickly, as if the sight of Meggie had made it mortally afraid too, but there was still something moving under the bush, and finally a head pushed out from the prickly twigs. It was furry and round-nosed, and it had tiny horns between its ears.

‘No!’ whispered Meggie. ‘Oh no!’

Gwin stared at her almost reproachfully, as if he thought it was her fault that his fur was full of fine prickles.

Farid’s voice above her was more distinct now. Obviously he was finally coming down from his lookout post. ‘No hut, no castle, nothing in sight!’ he called. ‘It’ll be a few days before we get out of this forest, but that’s how Dustfinger wanted it. He wanted to take his time coming back to the world of humans. I think he was almost more homesick for the trees and fairies than for other people. Well, I don’t know about you – and the trees are beautiful, very beautiful – but personally I’d like to see the castle too, and the other strolling players, and the men-at-arms.’

He jumped down on the grass, hopped on one leg through the carpet of blue flowers – and let out a cry of delight when he saw the marten. ‘Gwin! Oh, I knew you’d heard me! Come here, you son of a devil and a snake! Won’t Dustfinger be surprised to see we’ve brought him his old friend after all!’

Oh, won't he just! thought Meggie. Fear will take his breath away – he'll go weak at the knees.

The marten jumped on to Farid's knee as the boy crouched down in the grass, and affectionately licked his chin. He would have bitten anyone else, even Dustfinger, but with Farid he acted like a young kitten.

'Shoo him away, Farid!' Meggie's voice sounded sharper than she had intended.

'Shoo him away?' Farid laughed. 'What are you talking about? Hear that, Gwin? What have you done to offend her? Left a dead mouse on one of her precious books?'

'Shoo him away, I said! He'll be all right on his own, you know he will. Please!' she added, seeing his horrified expression as he looked at her.

Farid straightened up, the marten in his arms. His face was more hostile than she had ever seen it before. Gwin jumped up on his shoulder and stared at Meggie as if he had understood every word she said. Very well, then, she'd just have to tell Farid – but how?

'Didn't Dustfinger tell you?'

'Tell me what?' He looked at her as if he'd like to hit her.

Above them, the wind blew through the leaf canopy like a menacing whisper.

'If you don't shoo Gwin away,' said Meggie, although each word was difficult to utter, 'then Dustfinger will. And he'll chase you away too.'

The marten was still staring at her.

'Why would he do a thing like that? You don't like him, that's what it is. You never liked Dustfinger, and you don't like Gwin either.'

'That's not true! You don't understand!' Meggie's voice was loud and shrill. 'He's going to die because of Gwin! Dustfinger dies, that's how Fenoglio wrote the story! Perhaps it's been

changed, perhaps this is a new story we're in and everything in the book is just a pile of dead words, but all the same ...'

Meggie hadn't the heart to go on. Farid stood there shaking his head again and again, as if her words were like needles digging into it, hurting him.

'He's going to die?' His voice was barely audible. 'He dies in the book?'

How lost he looked standing there with the marten still perched on his shoulder! He looked at the trees around them with horror, as if they were all intent on killing Dustfinger. 'But – but if I'd known that,' he stammered, 'I'd have torn up Cheeseface's wretched piece of paper! I'd never have let him read Dustfinger back!'

Meggie just looked at him. What could she say?

'Who kills him? Basta?'

Two squirrels were chasing about overhead. They had white spots as if someone had shaken a paintbrush over them. The marten wanted to go after them, but Farid seized his tail and held it tight.

'One of Capricorn's men. That's all Fenoglio wrote!'

'But they're all dead!'

'We don't know that.' Meggie would have been only too glad to comfort him, but she didn't know how. 'Suppose they're still alive in this world? And even if they aren't – Mo and Darius didn't read all of them out. Some are still sure to be here. Dustfinger tries to save Gwin from them, and they kill him. That's what it says in the book, and Dustfinger knows it. That's why he left the marten behind.'

'Yes, so he did.' Farid looked round as if seeking some solution, a way he could send the marten back again. Gwin nuzzled his cheek with his nose, and Meggie saw the tears in Farid's eyes.

‘Wait here!’ he said, and he turned abruptly and went off with the marten. He had gone only a few paces before the forest swallowed him up like a frog swallowing a fly, and Meggie stood there on her own among the flowers. Some of them grew in Elinor’s garden too, but this wasn’t Elinor’s garden. This wasn’t even the same world. And this time she couldn’t just close the book and be back again: back in her own room, on the sofa that smelled of Elinor. The world beyond the words on the page was wide – hadn’t she always known it? – wide enough for her to be lost there forever. Only one person could write her out of it again – an old man – and Meggie didn’t even know where he lived in this world he had created. She didn’t even know if he was still alive. Could this world live if its creator was dead? Why not? Books don’t stop existing just because their authors have died, do they?

What have I done? thought Meggie as she stood there waiting for Farid to come back. *Oh Mo, what have I done? Can’t you fetch me back again?*



11

Gone

I woke up and knew he was gone. Straight away I knew he was gone. When you love somebody you know these things.

David Almond,
Skellig

Mo knew at once that Meggie was gone. He knew it the moment he knocked on her door and only silence replied. Resa was down in the kitchen with Elinor, laying the table for breakfast. The clink of the plates made its way upstairs to him, but he hardly heard it; he just stood there outside the closed door, listening to his own heart. It was beating far too loudly, far too fast. 'Meggie?' He pressed the handle down, but the door was locked. Meggie never locked her door, never.

His heart beat even faster, as if to choke him. The silence behind the door sounded terribly familiar. Just such a silence had met his ears once before, when he had called Resa's name again and again. He had waited ten years for an answer.

Not again, please God, not again. Not Meggie.

It seemed as if he heard the book whispering on the other side of the door: Fenoglio's accursed story. He thought he heard the pages rustling, greedy as pale teeth.

‘Mortimer?’ Elinor was standing behind him. ‘The eggs are getting cold. Where are you and Meggie? Oh heavens!’ She looked at his face with concern and reached for his hand. ‘What’s the matter with you? You’re pale as death.’

‘Do you have a spare key for Meggie’s door, Elinor?’

She understood at once. Just like Mo, she guessed what had happened behind that locked door, presumably last night when they were all asleep. She pressed his hand. Then she turned without a word and hurried downstairs. But Mo just stood there leaning against the locked door, heard Elinor call Darius and begin to search for the key, cursing, and he stared at the books standing side by side on her shelves all down the long corridor. Resa came running upstairs, pale-faced. Her hands fluttered like frightened birds as she asked him what had happened. What was he to say?

‘Can’t you imagine? Haven’t you told her about the place often enough?’ He tried the handle again, as if that could change anything. Meggie had covered the whole door with quotations. They looked to him now like magic spells written on the white paint in a childish hand. *Take me to another world! Go on! I know you can do it. My father has shown me how.* Odd that your heart didn’t simply stop when it hurt so much. But his heart hadn’t stopped ten years ago either, when the words on the page swallowed Resa up.

Elinor pushed him aside. She was holding the key in her trembling fingers, and she impatiently put it in the lock. Crossly, she called Meggie’s name, as if she too hadn’t guessed long ago that nothing but silence waited behind that door: the same silence as on the night that had taught Mo to fear his own voice.

He was the last to enter the empty room, and he did so hesitantly. There was a letter on Meggie’s pillow. *Dearest Mo ...* he didn’t read on, he didn’t want to see the words that would only pierce him to the heart. As Resa picked up the letter he

looked round the room – his eyes searching for another sheet of paper, the one the boy had brought with him – but it was nowhere to be found. Well, of course not, you fool, he told himself. She's taken it with her; after all, she must have been holding it while she read.

Only years later would he discover from Meggie that the original sheet of paper with Orpheus's writing on it had been there in her room all the time, hidden between the pages of a book – where else? Her geography book. Suppose he had found it? Would he have been able to follow Meggie? No, probably not. The story had another path in store for him, a darker and more difficult path.

'Perhaps she's only gone off with the boy! Girls of her age do that kind of thing. Not that I know much about it, but ...' Elinor's voice reached him as if from very far away. In answer, Resa handed her the letter that had been waiting on the pillow.

Gone. Meggie was gone.

He had no daughter any more.

Would she come back, like her mother? Fished out of the sea of words again by some other voice? If so, when? In ten years' time, like Resa? She'd be grown up by then. Would he even recognize her? Everything was blurred before his eyes: Meggie's school things on the desk in front of the window, her clothes, carefully hanging over the back of the chair as if she really meant to come back, her soft toys beside the bed, their furry faces kissed threadbare, although it was a long time since Meggie had needed them to help her get to sleep. Resa began crying without a sound, one hand pressed to her mute mouth. Mo wanted to comfort her, but how could he with such despair in his own heart?

He turned, pushed aside Darius, who was standing there in the open doorway with a sad, owl-like gaze, and went to his study, where those damned notebooks were still stacked among his own papers. He swept them off the desk one by one, as if he

could silence the words that way – all the accursed words that had bewitched his child, luring her away like the Pied Piper in the story, to a place where he had already been unable to follow Resa. Mo felt as if he were dreaming the same nightmare all over again, but this time he didn't even have a book whose pages he could have searched for Meggie.

Later, he couldn't say how he had got through the rest of that day without going mad. All he remembered was wandering for hours through Elinor's garden, as if he might find Meggie somewhere there among the old trees where she liked to sit and read. When darkness fell and he set out to look for Resa, he found her in Meggie's room. She was sitting on the empty bed, staring at three tiny creatures circling just below the ceiling, as if they were looking for the door they had come through. Meggie had left the window open, but they didn't fly out, perhaps because the strange, black night frightened them.

'Fire-elves,' said Resa's hands when he sat down beside her. 'If they settle on your skin you must shake them off, or they'll burn you.'

Fire-elves. Mo remembered reading about them in the book. Something always came back in return. There seemed to be just that one book in the whole world.

'Why three of them?' he asked. 'One for Meggie, one for the boy ...'

'I think the marten went too,' said Resa's hands.

Mo almost laughed out loud. Poor Dustfinger, he obviously couldn't shake off his bad luck – but Mo could feel no sympathy for him. Not this time. Without Dustfinger the words on the sheet of paper would never have been written, and he would still have a daughter.

'Do you think at least she'll like it there?' he asked, laying his head in Resa's lap. 'After all, you liked it, didn't you? Or, at any rate, you told her so.'

'I'm sorry,' said her hands. 'So very sorry.'

But he held her fingers tight. 'What are you talking about?' he said softly. 'I was the one who brought the damned book into the house, remember?' And then they were both silent. In silence, they watched the poor, lost elves. At some point they did fly through the window, and into the strange night. As their tiny red bodies disappeared into the blackness like sparks going out, Mo wondered whether Meggie was wandering through an equally black night at this moment. The thought pursued him into his dark dreams.



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12

Uninvited Guests

‘You people with hearts,’ he said once, ‘have something to guide you, and need never do wrong; but I have no heart, and so I must be very careful.’

**L. Frank Baum,
*The Wizard of Oz***

On the day when Meggie disappeared silence moved back into Elinor’s house, but not the silence of the old days when only her books lived there with her. The silence that now filled the rooms and corridors tasted of sorrow. Resa wept a great deal, and Mortimer said nothing, as if paper and ink had swallowed up not just his daughter, but all the words in the world with her. He spent a lot of time in his workshop, ate little, hardly slept – and on the third day Darius, looking very anxious, went to Elinor and told her that Silvertongue was packing up all his tools.

When Elinor entered his workshop, out of breath because Darius had been tugging her along behind him so fast, Mortimer was throwing the stamps he used for gold leaf into a crate, pell-mell – tools that he normally handled as carefully as if they were made of glass.

‘What the devil are you doing?’ enquired Elinor.

‘What does it look like?’ he replied, and began clearing away his sewing frame. ‘I’m going to find another profession. I never want to touch a book again, curse them all. Other people can listen to the stories they tell and mend the clothes they wear. I want nothing more to do with them.’

When Elinor went to fetch Resa to help her, Resa just shook her head.

‘Well, I can understand why those two are useless just now,’ commented Elinor, as she and Darius sat at breakfast by themselves yet again. ‘How could Meggie do a thing like that to them? What was her idea – did she want to break her poor parents’ hearts? Or prove once and for all that books are dangerous?’

Darius had no answer but silence. He had been the same all these last few sad days.

‘For heaven’s sake, all of you silent as the grave!’ Elinor snapped at him. ‘We must do something to get the silly creature back. Anything. Good God, it can’t be as difficult as all that! After all, there are no fewer than two Silvertongues under this roof!’

Darius looked at her in alarm and choked on his tea. He had left his gift unused for so long that no doubt it seemed like a dream to him – and he didn’t want to be reminded of it.

‘All right, all right, you don’t have to read aloud,’ Elinor assured him impatiently. Good God, that owlsh gaze of horror! She could have shaken him. ‘Mortimer can do it! But what should he read? Think, Darius! If we want to fetch her back, should it be something about the Inkworld or about our own world? Oh, I’m all confused. Perhaps we can write something like: *Once upon a time there was a grumpy middle-aged woman called Elinor who loved nothing but her books, until one day her niece moved in with her, along with the niece’s husband and daughter. Elinor liked that, but one day the daughter set off on a very, very stupid journey, and Elinor swore that she would give all*

her books away if only the child would come home. She packed them up in big crates, and as she was putting the last book in, Meggie walked through the doorway ... Heavens above, don't stare at me in that sympathetic way!' she snapped at Darius. 'I'm trying to do something, at least! And you yourself keep saying: Mortimer is a master, it takes him only a couple of sentences!'

Darius adjusted his glasses. 'Yes, only a couple of sentences,' he said, in his gentle, uncertain voice. 'But they must be sentences describing a whole world, Elinor. The words must make music. They must be so closely interwoven that the voice doesn't fall through.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake!' Elinor said brusquely – although she knew he was right. Mortimer had once tried to explain it to her in almost the same way: the mystery of why not every story would come to life. But she didn't want to hear about that, not now. Damn you, Elinor, she thought bitterly, damn you three times over for all those evenings you spent with the silly child imagining what it would be like to live in that other world, among fairies, brownies and glass men. There had been many such evenings, very many, and Mortimer had often put his head round the door and asked, sarcastically, if they couldn't discuss something other than Wayless Woods and blue-skinned fairies just for once.

Well, at least Meggie knows all she needs to know about that world, thought Elinor, wiping the tears from her eyes. She realizes she must be careful of the Adderhead and his men-at-arms, and she mustn't go too far into the forest or she'll probably be eaten, torn to pieces or trodden underfoot. And she'd be well advised not to look up when she passes a gallows. She knows she must bow when a prince rides by, and that she can still wear her hair loose because she's only a girl ... damn it, here came the tears again! Elinor was mopping the corners of her eyes with the hem of her blouse when someone rang the front door bell.

Many years later, she was still angry with herself for the stupidity that didn't warn her to look through the spy-hole in the door before opening it. Of course she had thought it was Resa or Mortimer outside. Of course. Stupid Elinor. Stupid, stupid Elinor. She had realized her mistake only when she opened the door, and there stood the stranger in front of her.

He was not very tall and rather too well-fed, with pale skin and equally pale fair hair. The eyes behind his rimless glasses looked slightly surprised, almost innocent like a child's. He opened his mouth to speak as Elinor put her head round the door, but she cut him short.

'What are you doing here?' she barked. 'This is private property. Didn't you see the notice down by the road?'

He had come in a car; the impudent fool had simply brought it up her drive! Elinor saw it, a dusty, dark blue vehicle, standing beside her own station wagon. She thought she saw a huge dog on the passenger seat. That was the last straw!

'Yes, of course I did!' The stranger's smile was so innocent that it suited his childish face. 'Why, no one could miss seeing the notice, and I really do apologize, Signora Loredan, for my sudden and unannounced arrival.'

Heavens above – it took Elinor's breath away. The moon-faced man's voice was almost as beautiful as Mortimer's, deep and velvety like a cushion. Coming from that round face with its childlike eyes, it was so incongruous that you felt almost as if the stranger had swallowed its real owner and taken over his voice.

'Never mind the apologies!' said Elinor abruptly, once she had got over her surprise. 'Just get out.' And so saying, she was about to close the door again, but the stranger only smiled (a smile that no longer looked quite so innocent) and jammed his shoe between the door and the frame. A dusty brown shoe.

'Do forgive me, Signora Loredan,' he said softly, 'but I've come about a book. A truly unique book. I have heard, of

course, that you have a remarkable library, but I can assure you that you don't yet have this book in your collection.'

With an almost reverent expression on his face, he put a hand under his pale, creased linen jacket. Elinor recognized the book at once. Of course. It was the only book that made her heart beat faster not because it was a particularly fine edition, or because she longed to read it. No. At the sight of that book Elinor's heart beat faster for only one reason: because she feared it like a ferocious animal.

'Where did you get that from?' She answered her question herself, but unfortunately a little too late. Suddenly, very suddenly, the memory of the boy's story came back to her. 'Orpheus!' she whispered – and she wanted to shout, loud enough for Mortimer to hear her in his workshop, but before a sound could come out of her mouth someone slipped out of the cover of the rhododendron bushes by the front door, quick as a lizard, and put his hand over her mouth.

'Well, my lady bookworm,' a man's voice purred in her ear. Elinor had so often heard that voice in her dreams, and every time she found herself fighting for breath at the sound of it! Even in broad daylight the effect was just as bad. Basta pushed her roughly back into the house. Of course, he had a knife in his hand; Elinor could as easily imagine Basta without a nose as without a knife. Orpheus turned and waved to the strange car. A man built like a wardrobe got out, strolled around the car at a leisurely pace, and opened the back door. An old woman stuck her legs out and reached for his arm.

Mortola. The Magpie.

Another regular visitor to Elinor's nightmares.

The old woman's legs were thickly bandaged under her dark stockings, and she leaned on a stick as she walked towards Elinor's house on the wardrobe-man's arm. She hobbled into the hall with a grimly determined expression, as if she were taking possession of the whole house, and the look she gave Elinor was

so openly hostile that its recipient felt weak at the knees, hard as she tried to hide her fear. A thousand dreadful memories came back to her – memories of a cage stinking of raw meat, a square lit by the beams of glaring car headlights, and fear, dreadful fear ...

Basta closed the door of the house behind Mortola. He hadn't changed: the same thin face, the same way of narrowing his eyes, and there was an amulet dangling around his neck to ward off the bad luck that Basta thought lurked under every ladder, behind every bush.

'Where are the others?' Mortola demanded, while the wardrobe-man looked around him with a foolish expression. The sight of all those books seemed to fill him with boundless astonishment. He was probably wondering what on earth anyone would do with so many.

'The others? I don't know who you're talking about.' Elinor thought her voice sounded remarkably steady for a woman half dead with terror.

Mortola's small, round chin jutted aggressively. 'You know perfectly well. I'm talking about Silvertongue and his witch of a daughter, and that maidservant, the one he calls his wife. Shall I get Basta to set fire to a few of your books, or will you call the three of them for us of your own accord?'

Basta? Basta's afraid of fire, Elinor wanted to reply, but she refrained. It wasn't difficult to hold a lighted match to a book. Even Basta, who feared fire so much, would probably be capable of that small action, and the wardrobe-man didn't look bright enough to be afraid of anything. I just have to keep stalling, thought Elinor. After all, they don't know about the workshop in the garden, or about Darius either.

'Elinor?' she heard Darius call at that very moment. Before she could reply, Basta's hand was over her mouth again. She heard Darius come down the corridor with his usual rapid

tread. 'Elinor?' he called again. Then the footsteps stopped as abruptly as his voice.

'Surprise, surprise!' purred Basta. 'Aren't you glad to see us, Stumbletongue? A couple of old friends come to pay you a visit!' Basta's left hand was bandaged, Elinor noticed when he took his fingers away from her mouth, and she remembered the hissing creature that Farid said had slipped through the words in Dustfinger's place. What a pity it didn't eat rather more of our knife-happy friend, she thought.

'Basta!' Darius's voice was little more than a whisper.

'That's right, Basta! I'd have been here much sooner, believe you me, but they put me in jail for a while on account of something that happened years ago. No sooner was Capricorn gone than all the people who'd been too scared to open their mouths suddenly felt very brave. Well, never mind. You could say they did me a favour, because who do you think they put in my cell one fine day? I never could get him to tell me his real name, so let's call him by the name he's given himself: Orpheus!' He slapped the man so hard on the back that he stumbled forward. 'Yes, our good friend Orpheus!' Basta put an arm around his shoulders. 'The Devil did me a real favour when he made Orpheus, of all people, my cellmate – or perhaps our story is so keen to have us back that it sent him? Well, one way or another, we had a good time, didn't we?'

Orpheus did not look at him. He straightened his jacket in embarrassment, and inspected Elinor's bookshelves.

'Hey, just look at him!' Basta dug his elbow roughly into Orpheus's ribs. 'You wouldn't believe how often I've told him there's nothing to be ashamed of in going to jail, particularly when your prisons here are so much more comfortable than our dungeons at home. Come on, tell them how I found out about your invaluable gifts. How I caught you one night reading yourself that stupid dog out of the book! Reading himself a dog! Lord knows, I could think of better ideas.'

Basta laughed nastily, and Orpheus straightened his tie with nervous fingers. 'Cerberus is still in the car,' he told Mortola. 'He doesn't like it there at all. We ought to bring him in!'

The wardrobe-man turned to the door. He obviously had a soft spot for animals, but Mortola stopped him with an impatient gesture.

'The dog stays where it is. I can't stand that creature!' Frowning, she looked around Elinor's hall. 'Well, I expected your house to be bigger than this,' she said, with assumed disappointment. 'I thought you were rich.'

'So she is!' Basta flung his arm so roughly round Orpheus's neck that his glasses slipped down his nose. 'But she spends all her money on books. What would she pay us for the book we took from Dustfinger, do you think?' He pinched Orpheus's round cheeks. 'Yes, our friend here made good juicy bait for the fire-eater. He may look like a bullfrog, but even Silvertongue can't make the words obey him so well, let alone Darius. Ask Dustfinger – Orpheus sent him home as if nothing could be easier! Not that the fire-eater will—'

'Hold your tongue, Basta!' Mortola interrupted him abruptly. 'You've always liked the sound of your own voice. Well?' She impatiently tapped her stick on the marble tiles that were Elinor's pride and joy. 'Where are they? Where are the others? I shan't ask again!'

Come along, Elinor told herself, lie to them. Lie yourself blue in the face! Quick! But she hadn't even opened her mouth when she heard the key in the lock. Oh no! No, Mortimer! she prayed silently. Stay where you are! Go back to the workshop with Resa, shut yourselves up there, but please, please don't come in just now!

Of course her prayers made not the slightest difference.

Mortimer opened the door, came in with his arm round Resa's shoulders – and stopped abruptly at the sight of Orpheus. Before he had entirely grasped what was going on, the man

built like a wardrobe had closed the door behind him in obedience to a signal from Mortola.

‘Hello there, Silvertongue!’ said Basta, in a menacingly soft voice, as he snapped his knife open in front of Mortimer’s face. ‘And isn’t this our lovely mute Resa? Excellent! Two birds with one stone. All we need now is the little witch.’

Elinor saw Mortimer close his eyes for a moment, as if hoping that Basta and Mortola would have disappeared when he opened them again. But, naturally, no such thing happened.

‘Call her!’ ordered Mortola, as she stared at Mortimer with such hatred in her eyes that Elinor felt afraid.

‘Who?’ he asked, without taking his eyes off Basta.

‘Don’t pretend to be more stupid than you are!’ Mortola said crossly. ‘Or do you want me to let Basta cut the same pattern on your wife’s face as he did on the fire-eater’s?’

Basta ran his thumb lovingly over the gleaming blade.

‘If by “little witch” you mean my daughter,’ replied Mortimer huskily, ‘she isn’t here.’

‘Oh no?’ Mortola hobbled towards him. ‘Be careful what you say. My legs are aching after that endless drive to get here, so I’m not feeling particularly patient.’

‘She isn’t here,’ Mortimer repeated. ‘Meggie has gone away, with the boy you took the book from. He asked her to take him to Dustfinger, she did it – and she went with him.’

Mortola narrowed her eyes incredulously. ‘Nonsense!’ she exclaimed. ‘How could she have done it without the book?’ But Elinor saw the doubt in her face.

Mortimer shrugged. ‘The boy had a hand-written sheet of paper with him – the one that sent Dustfinger back, apparently.’

‘That’s impossible!’ Orpheus looked at him in astonishment. ‘Are you seriously saying your daughter read herself into the story, using my words?’

‘Oh, so you’re this Orpheus, are you?’ Mortimer returned his glance, not in a very friendly way. ‘Then you’re responsible for the loss of my daughter.’

Orpheus straightened his glasses and gave Mortimer an equally hostile look. Then, abruptly, he turned to Mortola. ‘Is this man Silvertongue?’ he demanded. ‘He’s lying! I’m sure of it! He’s lying! No one can read themselves into a story. He can’t, his daughter can’t, no one can. I’ve tried it myself, hundreds of times. It doesn’t work!’

‘Yes,’ said Mortimer wearily. ‘That’s just what I thought too. Until four days ago.’

Mortola stared at him. Then she signalled to Basta. ‘Shut them up in the cellar!’ she ordered. ‘And then look for the girl. Search the whole house.’



Fenoglio

‘I do practise remembering, Nain,’ I said. ‘Writing and reading and remembering.’

‘That you should!’ said Nain sharply. ‘Do you know what happens each time you write a thing down? Each time you name it? You sap its strength.’

**Kevin Crossley-Holland,
*The Seeing Stone***

It wasn’t easy to get past the guards at the gate of Ombra after dark, but Fenoglio knew them all. He had written many love poems for the heavily-built oaf who barred his way with his spear tonight – and very successful they were, he had been told. Judging by the fool’s appearance, he’d be needing to call on Fenoglio’s services again.

‘But mind you’re back before midnight, scribbler!’ the ugly fellow grunted before letting him pass. ‘That’s when the Ferret takes over from me, and he’s not interested in your poems, even though his girl can read.’

‘Thanks for the warning!’ said Fenoglio, giving the stupid fellow a false smile as he pushed past him. As if he didn’t know that the Ferret was not to be trifled with! His stomach still hurt when he remembered how that sharp-nosed fellow had dug the shaft of his spear into it, when he’d tried pushing past him with

a couple of well-chosen words. No, there'd be no bribing the Ferret, not with poems or any other written gifts. The Ferret wanted gold, and Fenoglio didn't have too much of that, or at least not enough to waste it on a guard at the city gates.

'Midnight!' he cursed quietly as he stumbled down the steep path. 'As if that wasn't just when the strolling players wake up!'

His landlady's son carried the torch ahead of him. Ivo was nine years old and full of insatiable curiosity about all the wonders of his world. He was always fighting his sister for the honour of carrying the torch when Fenoglio went to visit the strolling players. Fenoglio paid Ivo's mother a few coins a week for a room in the attic. The price included the washing, cooking and mending that Minerva did for him too. In return, Fenoglio told her children bedtime stories, and listened patiently as she told him what a stubborn oaf her husband could be at times. The fact was, Fenoglio had struck lucky.

The boy scurried along ahead of him with increasing impatience. He could hardly wait to reach the brightly coloured tents, where music played and firelight shone among the trees. He kept looking round reproachfully, as if Fenoglio were taking his time on purpose. Did he think an old man could go as fast as a grasshopper?

The Motley Folk had pitched camp where the ground was so stony that nothing would grow on it, behind the cottages where the peasants who farmed the Laughing Prince's land lived. Now that the Prince of Ombra no longer wanted to hear their jests and songs, they came less often than before, but luckily the prince's grandson wanted players to entertain him on his birthday, so this Sunday they would at last come streaming through the city gates: fire-eaters and tightrope-walkers, animal tamers and knife-throwers, actors, buffoons, and many a minstrel whose songs came from Fenoglio's pen.

For Fenoglio liked writing for the Motley Folk: merry songs, sad songs, songs to make you laugh or weep, as the spirit

moved him. He couldn't earn more than a few copper coins for those songs; the strolling players' pockets were always empty. If his words were to earn gold then he must write for princes or for a rich merchant. But when he made the words dance and pull faces, when he wanted to write tales of peasants and robbers, of ordinary folk who didn't live in castles or eat from golden plates, then he wrote for the strolling players.

It had taken some time for them to accept him into their tents. Only when more and more wandering minstrels were singing Fenoglio's songs, and their children were asking for his stories, did they stop turning him away. And now even their king invited Fenoglio to sit beside his fire, as he had tonight. Although not a drop of royal blood ran in his veins, this man was known as the Black Prince. The Prince took good care of his motley subjects, and they had chosen him to lead them twice already. It was better not to ask where all the gold he gave so generously to the sick and crippled came from, but Fenoglio knew one thing: he himself had invented the Prince.

Oh yes, I made them all! he thought, as the music came more clearly through the night air. He had made up the Prince and the tame bear that followed him like a dog, and Cloud-Dancer who, sad to say, fell off his rope, and many more, even the two rulers who believed that they laid down the law in this world. Fenoglio had not yet seen all his creations, but every time he suddenly met one in flesh and blood it made his heart beat faster – although he couldn't always remember whether any particular one of them had really sprung from his own pen, or came from somewhere else ...

There were the tents at last, bright as windblown flowers in the black night. Ivo began running so fast that he almost fell over his own feet. A dirty boy with hair as unkempt as an alley cat's fur came out to meet them, hopping on one leg. He grinned challengingly at Ivo – and ran away on his hands. Lord, these players' children performed such contortions, you might think they had no bones in their bodies!

‘Off you go, then!’ growled Fenoglio when Ivo looked pleadingly at him. After all, he didn’t need the torch any more. Several fires were burning among the tents, which often consisted of little more than a few grubby lengths of cloth stretched over ropes between the trees. Fenoglio looked around with a sigh of satisfaction as the boy raced away. Yes, this was just as he’d imagined the Inkworld as he wrote his story: bright and noisy, full of life. The air smelled of smoke, of roast meat, of rosemary and thyme, horses, dogs and dirty clothes, pine needles and burning wood. Oh, he loved it! He loved the hurry and bustle, he even loved the dirt, he loved the way life here was lived before his very eyes, not behind locked doors. You could learn anything in this world: how the smith shaped the metal of a sickle in the fire, how the dyer mixed his dyes, how the tanner removed hair from leather and how the cobbler cut it to shape to make shoes. Nothing happened behind closed doors. It was all going on, in the alleyways, on the road, in the market place, here among shabby tents, and he, Fenoglio – still as curious as a boy – could watch, although the stench of the leather mordant and the dye tubs sometimes took his breath away. Yes, he liked this world of his. He liked it very much – although he couldn’t help seeing that not everything was working out the way he had intended.

It was his own fault. I should have written a sequel, thought Fenoglio, making his way through the crowd. I could still write one, here and now, and change everything, if only I had someone to read it aloud! Of course he had looked for another Silvertongue, but in vain. No Meggie, no Mortimer, not even someone like that man Darius who was more than likely to botch the job ... and Fenoglio could play only the part of a writer whose fine words didn’t exactly keep him in luxury, while the two princes he had invented ruled his world after their own fashion. Annoying, extremely annoying.

One of those princes above all gave him cause for concern – the Adderhead.

He reigned to the south of the forest, high above the sea, sitting on the silver throne of the Castle of Night. As an invented character, not by any means a bad one. A bloodhound, a ruthless slave-driver – but after all, the villains are the salt in the soup of a story. If you can keep them under control. It was for this purpose that Fenoglio had thought up the Laughing Prince, a ruler who would rather laugh at the broad jokes of the strolling players than wage war, and his magnificent son Cosimo. Who could have guessed that Cosimo would simply die, and then his father would collapse with grief like a cake taken out of the oven too soon?

Not my fault! How often Fenoglio had told himself that. Not my idea, not my fault! But it had happened all the same. As if some diabolical scribbler had intervened, going on with the story in his place and leaving him, Fenoglio, the creator of this whole world, with nothing but the role of a poor writer!

Oh, stop that. You're not so poor, Fenoglio, he thought as he stopped beside a minstrel sitting among the tents, singing one of Fenoglio's own songs. No, he wasn't poor. The Laughing Prince, who was now the Prince of Sighs, would hear only Fenoglio's laments for his dead son, and Balbulus, the most famous illuminator far and wide, had to record the stories Fenoglio wrote for the Prince's grandson Jacopo in his own hand, on the most costly of parchment. No, he really wasn't so poor!

And moreover, didn't his words now seem to him better in a minstrel's mouth than pressed between the pages of a book, to lie there gathering dust? He liked to think of them as free, owing no one allegiance. They were too powerful to be given in printed form to any fool who might do God knew what with them. Looked at that way, it was reassuring to think that there were no printed books in this world. Books here were handwritten, which made them so valuable that only princes could afford them. Other folk had to store the words in their heads, or listen to minstrels singing them.

A little boy tugged at Fenoglio's sleeve. His tunic had holes in it, and his nose was running. 'Inkweaver!' He brought out a mask from behind his back, the kind of mask worn by the actors, and quickly put it over his eyes. There were feathers, light brown and blue, stuck to the cracked leather. 'Who am I, Inkweaver?'

'Hm!' Fenoglio wrinkled his lined brow as if he had to think hard about it.

The mouth below the mask drooped in disappointment. 'The Bluejay! I'm the Bluejay, of course!'

'Of course!' Fenoglio pinched the child's red little nose.

'Will you tell us another story about him today? Please!'

'Maybe! I must admit, I imagine his mask as rather more impressive than yours. What do you think? Shouldn't you look for a few more feathers?'

The boy took off his mask and looked at it crossly. 'They're not very easy to find.'

'Take a look down by the river. Even bluejays aren't safe from the cats that go hunting there.' He was about to move away, but the boy held on tight. Thin as the children of the strolling players might be, they had strong little hands.

'Just one story. Please, Inkweaver!'

Two other children joined him, a girl and a boy. They looked expectantly at Fenoglio. Ah, yes, the Bluejay stories. He'd always told good robber tales – his own grandchildren had liked them too, back in the other world. But the stories he thought up here were much better. You heard them everywhere these days: *The Incredible Deeds of the Bravest of Robbers*, *the Noble and Fearless Bluejay*. Fenoglio still remembered the night he had made the Bluejay up. His hand had been trembling with rage as he wrote. 'The Adderhead's caught another of the strolling players,' the Black Prince had told him that night. 'It was Crookback this time. They hanged him at noon yesterday.'

Crookback – one of his own characters! A harmless fellow who could stand on his head longer than anyone else. ‘Who does this prince think he is?’ Fenoglio had cried out into the night, as if the Adderhead could hear him. ‘I am lord of life and death in this world, I, Fenoglio, no one else!’ And the words had gone down on paper, wild and angry as the robber he created that night. The Bluejay was all that Fenoglio would have liked to be in the world he had made: free as a bird, subject to no lord, fearless, noble (sometimes witty too), a man who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor, and protected the weak from the tyranny of the strong in a world where there was no law to do it ...

Fenoglio felt another tug at his sleeve. ‘Please, Inkweaver! Just *one* story!’ The boy was really persistent. He loved listening to stories, and would very likely make a famous minstrel some day. ‘They say the Bluejay stole the Adderhead’s lucky charm!’ whispered the little boy. ‘The hanged man’s finger-bone to protect him from the White Women. They say the Bluejay wears it around his own neck now.’

‘Do they indeed?’ Fenoglio raised his eyebrows, always a very effective move, thick and bushy as they were. ‘Well, I’ve heard of an even more daring deed, but I must have a word with the Black Prince first.’

‘Oh, please, Inkweaver!’ They were clinging to his sleeves, almost tearing off the expensive braid he’d had sewn on the coarse fabric for a few coins, so as not to look as poverty-stricken as the scribes who wrote wills and letters in the market place.

‘No!’ he said sternly, freeing his sleeve. ‘Later, maybe. Now go away!’

The boy with the runny nose looked at him so sadly that, for a moment, Fenoglio was reminded of his grandson. Pippo always used to look like that when he brought Fenoglio a book and put it on his lap with a hopeful expression ...

Ah, children! thought Fenoglio, as he walked towards the fire where he had seen the Black Prince. Children, they're the same everywhere. Greedy little creatures, but the best listeners in the world – any world. The very best of all.

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The Black Prince

‘So bears can make their own souls ...’ she said. There was a great deal in the world to know.

**Philip Pullman,
*Northern Lights***

The Black Prince was not alone. Of course not; his bear was with him, as usual. He was crouching by the fire behind his master, like a shaggy shadow. Fenoglio still remembered the words he had used when he first created the Prince at the very beginning of *Inkheart*. He recited them quietly to himself as he approached him: ‘An orphan boy with skin almost as black as his curly hair, as quick with his knife as his tongue, always ready to protect those he loved – his two younger sisters, a maltreated bear, or his best friend, his very best friend Dustfinger ...’

‘... who would have died an extremely dramatic death if it had been left to me, all the same!’ added Fenoglio quietly as he waved to the Prince. ‘But luckily my black friend doesn’t know that, or I don’t suppose I’d be very welcome at his fireside!’

The Prince returned his greeting. He probably thought he was called the Black Prince because of the colour of his skin, but Fenoglio knew better. He had stolen the name from a history book in his old world. A famous knight once bore it, a king’s

son who was a great robber too. Would he have been pleased to think that his name had been given to a knife-thrower, king of the strolling players? If not, there's nothing he can do about it, thought Fenoglio, for his own story came to its end long ago.

On the Prince's left sat the hopelessly incompetent physician who had almost broken Fenoglio's jaw pulling out a tooth, and to the right of him crouched Sootbird, a lousy fire-eater who knew as little of his trade as the physician knew of drawing teeth. Fenoglio was not quite sure about the physician, but there was no way he had invented Sootbird. Heaven knew where he had come from! All who saw him inefficiently breathing fire, in terror of the blaze, instantly found another name springing to mind: the name of Dustfinger the fire-dancer, tamer of the flames ...

The bear grunted as Fenoglio sat down by the fire with his master, and scrutinized him with little yellow eyes, as if to work out how much meat there was left to gnaw on such old bones. Your own fault, Fenoglio told himself: why did you have to make the Prince's companion a tame bear? A dog would have done just as well. The market traders told anyone who would listen that the bear was a man under a spell, bewitched by fairies or brownies (they couldn't decide which), but Fenoglio knew better. The bear was just a bear, a real bear who loved the Black Prince for freeing him, years ago, from the ring through his nose and from his former master, who beat him with a thorny stick to make him dance in market places.

Six more men were sitting beside the fire with the Black Prince. Fenoglio knew only two of them. One was an actor whose name Fenoglio kept forgetting. The other was a professional Strong Man who earned his living performing in market places: tearing chains apart, lifting grown men into the air, bending iron bars. They all fell silent as Fenoglio joined them. They tolerated his company, but he was not by any means one of them. Only the Prince smiled at him.

‘Ah, the Inkweaver!’ he said. ‘Do you have a new song about the Bluejay for us?’

Fenoglio accepted the goblet of hot wine and honey that one of the men gave him at a sign from the Prince, and sat down on the stony ground. His old bones didn’t really like hunkering down there, even on a night as mild as this, but the strolling players did not care for chairs or other forms of seating.

‘I really came to give you this,’ he said, putting his hand into the breast of his doublet. He looked around before handing the Prince the sealed letter, but in this milling throng it was difficult to see if anyone who didn’t belong to the Motley Folk was watching them.

The Prince took the letter with a nod and tucked it into his belt. ‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘You’re welcome!’ replied Fenoglio, trying to ignore the bear’s bad breath. The Prince couldn’t write, any more than most of his motley subjects could, but Fenoglio was happy to do it for him, particularly when it was something like this he wanted. The letter was for one of the Laughing Prince’s head foresters. His men had attacked the strolling players’ women and children on the road three times. No one else seemed to mind, neither the Laughing Prince in his grief nor the men who were supposed to do justice in his place, for the victims were only strolling players. So the king of the players himself was going to do something about it: the man would find Fenoglio’s letter on his doorstep that very night. Its contents would prevent him from sleeping in peace, and with luck would keep him away from women wearing the brightly coloured skirts of the Motley Folk in future. Fenoglio was rather proud of his threatening letters, almost as proud as he was of his robber songs.

‘Have you heard the latest, Inkweaver?’ The Prince stroked his bear’s black muzzle. ‘The Adderhead has put a price on the Bluejay’s head.’

‘The Bluejay?’ Fenoglio swallowed his wine the wrong way, and the physician thumped him on the back so hard that he spilled the hot drink over his fingers. ‘That’s a good one!’ he gasped, once he had his breath back. ‘Well, don’t let anyone say words are just noise and hot air! The Adder will have to search a long time for that particular robber!’

How oddly they were looking at him! As if they knew more than he did. But more about what?

‘Haven’t you heard yet, Inkweaver?’ said Sootbird quietly. ‘Your songs seem to be coming true! The Adderhead’s tax gatherers have already been robbed twice by a man in a bird mask, and one of his game wardens, a man famous for enjoying every kind of cruelty, is said to have been found dead in the forest with a feather in his mouth. Guess what bird the feather came from?’

Fenoglio glanced incredulously at the Prince, but he was looking at the fire, stirring the embers with a stick.

‘But ... but that’s astonishing!’ cried Fenoglio – and then hastily lowered his voice as he saw the others looking anxiously around. ‘Astonishing news, I mean!’ he went on in an undertone. ‘Whatever’s going on – well, I’ll write another song this minute! Suggest something! Go on! What would you like the Bluejay to do next?’

The Prince smiled, but the physician looked at Fenoglio with scorn. ‘You talk as if it were all a game, Inkweaver!’ he said. ‘You sit in your own room, scribbling a few words on paper, but whoever’s playing the part of your robber risks his neck, for he’s certainly made of flesh and blood, not just words!’

‘Yes, but no one knows his face, because the Bluejay wears a mask. Very clever of you, Inkweaver. How is the Adderhead to know what face to look for? A mask like that is very useful. Anyone can wear it.’ It was the actor speaking. Baptista. Yes, of course, that was his name. Did I make him up? Fenoglio wondered. Well, never mind; no one knew more about masks

than Baptista, perhaps because his face was disfigured by pock marks. Many of the actors got him to make them leather masks showing laughter or tears.

‘The songs give a detailed description of him, though.’ Sootbird gave Fenoglio a searching look.

‘So they do!’ Baptista leaped to his feet, put his hand to his shabby belt as if he wore a sword there, and peered around as if looking for an enemy. ‘He’s said to be tall. That’s no surprise. Heroes usually are.’ Baptista began prowling up and down on tiptoe. ‘His hair,’ he said, stroking his own head, ‘is dark, dark as moleskin, if we’re to believe the songs. Now, that’s unusual. Most heroes have golden hair, whatever you take golden hair to look like. We know nothing about his origins, but one thing’s for sure –’ and here Baptista assumed a haughty expression – ‘none but the purest princely blood flows in his veins. How else would he be so brave and noble?’

‘No, you’re wrong there!’ Fenoglio interrupted him. ‘The Bluejay is a man of the people. What kind of a robber gets born in a castle?’

‘You heard the poet!’ Baptista looked as if he were wiping the haughtiness right away from his brow with his hand. The other men laughed. ‘So let’s get to the face behind the feathered mask.’ Baptista ran his fingers over his own ruined face. ‘Of course he’s handsome and distinguished – and pale as ivory! The songs don’t say so, but we know that a hero’s skin is pale. With due respect, Your Highness!’ he added, bowing mockingly to the Black Prince.

‘Oh, don’t mind me! I’ve no objection!’ was all the Prince said, his expression unchanged.

‘Don’t forget the scar!’ said Sootbird. ‘The scar on his left arm where the dogs bit him. It’s mentioned in every song. Come along, roll up your sleeves. Let’s see if the Bluejay is by any chance here among us!’ He looked challengingly around him,

but only the Strong Man, laughing, pushed up his sleeve. The others sat in silence.

The Prince smoothed back his long hair. He had three knives at his belt. The strolling players, even the man they called their king, were forbidden to carry arms, but why should they keep laws that failed to protect them? Folk said the Prince was so skilful with a knife that he could aim at the eye of a dragonfly and hit it. Just as Fenoglio had once written.

‘Whatever he looks like, this man who’s making my songs come true, I drink to him. Let the Adderhead search for the man I described. He’ll never find him!’ Fenoglio raised his goblet to the company. He was feeling in the best of moods, almost intoxicated, and certainly not with the terrible wine. Well, he thought, and who says so, Fenoglio? You do! You write something and it comes true! Even without anyone to read it aloud ...

But the Strong Man spoiled his mood. ‘To be honest, Inkweaver, I don’t feel like celebrating,’ he growled. ‘They say the Adderhead is paying good silver these days for the tongue of every minstrel who sings songs mocking him. And they also say he has quite a collection of tongues already.’

‘Tongues?’ Instinctively, Fenoglio felt his own. ‘Does he mean my songs too?’

No one answered him. The men said nothing. The sound of a woman singing came from a tent behind them – a lullaby as sweet and peaceful as if it came from another world. A world of which one could only dream.

‘I’m always telling my motley subjects: don’t go near the Castle of Night!’ The Prince put a piece of meat dripping with fat in the bear’s mouth, wiped his knife on his trousers and returned it to his belt. ‘To think that we’re just food for crows to the Adderhead – mere carrion! But since the Laughing Prince took to weeping instead of laughing, they’ve all had empty pockets and empty bellies. That’s what sends them over there.

There are many rich merchants in Argenta, far more than on this side of the forest. It's not for nothing they call it the Silver Land.'

Devil take it. Fenoglio rubbed his aching knees. What had become of his good mood? Vanished – like the fragrance of a flower trodden underfoot. Gloomily, he took another sip of honeyed wine. The children came flocking around him again, begging for a story, but Fenoglio sent them away. He couldn't make up stories when he was in a bad temper.

'And there's another thing,' said the Prince. 'The Strong Man picked up a boy and a girl in the forest today. They told a strange story: they said Basta, Capricorn's knife-man, was back, and they're here to warn an old friend of mine about him – Dustfinger. I expect you've heard of him?'

'Mmph?' Fenoglio nearly choked on his wine with surprise. 'Dustfinger? Yes, of course, the fire-eater.'

'The best there's ever been.' The Prince cast a quick glance at Sootbird, but he was just showing the physician a sore tooth. 'He was thought to be dead,' the Prince went on, lowering his voice. 'No one's heard anything of him for over ten years. There were countless tales of how and where he died, but luckily none of them seem to be true. However, Dustfinger's not the only man the boy and girl are looking for. The girl was also asking about an old man, a writer with a face like a tortoise. You, by any chance?'

Fenoglio couldn't find a word in his head that would do for an answer. Saying no more, the Prince took his arm and pulled him to his feet. 'Come along!' he added, as the bear lumbered along behind them, grunting. 'The two of them were half-starved, said something about being deep in the Wayless Wood. The women are just feeding them now.'

A boy and a girl ... Dustfinger ... Fenoglio's thoughts were racing, although unfortunately his head was not at its clearest after two goblets of wine.

More than a dozen children were squatting in the grass under a lime tree on the outskirts of the camp. Two women were ladling out soup for them. The children greedily spooned the thin brew up from the wooden bowls that had been put into their dirty hands.

‘See how many they’ve rounded up again!’ the Prince whispered to Fenoglio. ‘We shall all go hungry because of their soft hearts.’

Fenoglio just nodded as he looked at the thin faces. He knew how often the Black Prince himself picked up hungry children. If they turned out to have any talent for juggling, standing on their heads, or other tricks that would bring a smile to people’s faces and lure a few coins out of their pockets, then the Motley Folk took them in and let them join the company of the strolling players, going from market to market, from town to town.

‘There they are.’ The Prince pointed to two heads bending particularly low over their bowls. When Fenoglio moved towards them, the girl raised her head as if he had called her name. Incredulously, she stared at him – and put her spoon down.

Meggie.

Fenoglio returned her gaze with such astonishment that she had to smile. Yes, it really was Meggie. He remembered that smile very well, even if she hadn’t often had reason to show it when they were imprisoned in Capricorn’s house together.

She leaped up, pushed past the other children and flung her arms around his neck. ‘Oh, I knew you were still here!’ she cried, between laughter and tears. ‘Did you really have to write those wolves into your story? And then the Night-Mares and the Redcaps – they threw stones at Farid and went for his face with fingers like claws. It was a good thing Farid could make a fire, but still ...’

Fenoglio opened his mouth – and closed it again, helplessly. His head was full of a thousand questions. How did she get here? What about Dustfinger? Where was her father? And what about Capricorn? Was he dead? Had her plan worked? If so, why was Basta still alive? The questions drowned each other out like humming insects, and Fenoglio dared not ask any of them while the Black Prince stood there, never taking his eyes off him.

‘I see you know these two,’ he remarked.

Fenoglio just nodded. Yes, where had he seen the boy sitting beside Meggie before? Wasn’t he with Dustfinger on that strange day when, for the first time, he met one of his own creations face to face?

‘Er ... they’re relations of mine,’ he stammered. What a pitiful lie for a storyteller!

The Prince’s mocking eyes sparkled. ‘Relations ... well, fancy that! I must say they don’t look very like you.’

Meggie unwound her arms from Fenoglio’s neck and stared at the Prince.

‘Meggie,’ said Fenoglio, ‘may I introduce the Black Prince?’

With a smile, the Prince made her a bow.

‘The Black Prince! Oh yes.’ Meggie repeated his name almost reverently. ‘And that’s his bear! Farid, come here. Look!’

Farid, of course. Fenoglio remembered him now. Meggie had often talked about him. The boy stood up, but not before hastily swallowing the very last of the soup in his bowl. He kept well behind Meggie, at a safe distance from the bear.

‘She absolutely insisted on coming!’ he said, wiping his greasy mouth on his arm. ‘Really! I didn’t want to bring her, but she’s as obstinate as a camel.’

Meggie was obviously about to make some sharp retort, but Fenoglio put his arm round her shoulders. ‘My dear boy,’ he told Farid, ‘you have no idea how glad I am to see Meggie here!’

I could almost say she's all I needed in this world to make me happy!'

He hastily took his leave of the Prince and drew Meggie and Farid away with him. 'Come with me!' he whispered as they made their way past the tents. 'We have a great deal to talk about, a very great deal, but we can do it better in my room without strange ears to overhear us. It's getting late anyway, and the guard at the gate won't let us back into the city after midnight.'

Meggie just nodded abstractedly and looked at the hurry and bustle all around her, wide-eyed, but Farid pulled his arm away from Fenoglio's grasp. 'I can't come with you. I have to look for Dustfinger!'

Fenoglio looked disbelievingly at him. So it was really true? Dustfinger was—

'Yes, he's back,' said Meggie. 'The women said Farid might find him at the house of the minstrel woman he once lived with. She has a farm up there on the hill.'

'Minstrel woman?' Fenoglio looked the way Meggie's finger was pointing. The hill she meant was only a black outline in the moonlit night. Of course! Roxane. He remembered her. Was she really as wonderful as he had described her?

The boy was shifting impatiently from foot to foot. 'I have to go,' he told Meggie. 'Where can I find you?'

'In Cobblers' and Saddlers' Alley,' replied Fenoglio, answering for Meggie. 'Just ask for Minerva's house.'

Farid nodded. He went on looking at Meggie.

'It's not a good idea to start a journey by night,' said Fenoglio, although he had a feeling that this boy wasn't interested in his advice. 'The roads here aren't what you'd call safe. Particularly not at night. There are robbers, vagabonds ...'

'I can look after myself.' Farid took a knife from his belt.

‘Take care, Meggie.’ He reached for her hand, then turned abruptly and disappeared among the strolling players. It did not escape Fenoglio that Meggie turned to look back at him several times.

‘Heavens, poor lad!’ he growled, shooing a couple of children out of the way as they came flocking up to beg him for a story again. ‘He’s in love with you, am I right?’

‘Oh, don’t!’ Meggie let go of his hand, but he had made her smile.

‘All right, I’ll hold my tongue! Does your father know you’re here?’

That was the wrong question. Her guilty conscience was plain to see in her face.

‘Dear me! Very well, you must tell me all about it. How you came here, what all this talk of Basta and Dustfinger means, everything! You’ve grown! Or have I shrunk? My God, Meggie, I’m so glad you’re here! Now we can get this story back under control! With my words and your voice—’

‘Under control? What do you mean?’ She suspiciously examined his face. She had often seen him look just like that in the past, when they were Capricorn’s prisoners – his brow wrinkled, his eyes as clear as if they could look straight into your heart. But this wasn’t the place for explanations.

‘Later!’ whispered Fenoglio, and drew her on. ‘Later, Meggie. There are too many ears here. Damn it, where’s my torchbearer now?’

15

Strange Sounds on a Strange Night

How silent lies the world
Within fair twilight furled,
Bringing such sweet relief!
A quiet room resembling,
Where, without fear or trembling,
You sleep away day's grief.

Matthias Claudius,
Evening Song

Later, when Meggie tried to remember the way they went to Fenoglio's room, she could see only a few blurred pictures in her mind's eye – a guard who tried to bar their way with his spear, but sullenly let them pass when he recognized Fenoglio, dark alleys down which they followed a boy with a torch, then a steep flight of steps, creaking underfoot as it led them up the side of a grey wall. She felt so dizzy with weariness as she followed Fenoglio up these steps that he felt quite anxious, and took her arm a couple of times.

'I think we'd better wait until morning to tell each other what's happened since we last met,' he said, propelling her into his room. 'I'll ask Minerva to bring you up a straw mattress

later, but you'll sleep in my bed tonight. Three days and nights in the Wayless Wood. Inky infernos, I'd probably have died of sheer fright!

'Farid had his knife,' murmured Meggie. The knife had indeed been a comfort when they were sleeping in the treetops by night, and those growling, grating noises came up to them from below. Farid had always kept it ready to hand. 'And when he saw ghosts,' she said sleepily, as Fenoglio lit a lamp, 'he made a fire.'

'Ghosts? There aren't any ghosts in this world, or at least none that I wrote into it. What did you eat all that time?'

Meggie groped her way over to the bed. It looked very inviting, even if it was only a straw mattress and a couple of coarse blankets. 'Berries,' she murmured. 'Lots of berries, and the bread we took with us from Elinor's kitchen – and rabbits, but Farid caught those.'

'Good heavens above!' Fenoglio shook his head, incredulous. It was really good to see his wrinkled face again, but right now all Meggie really wanted to do was sleep. She took her boots off, crept under the scratchy blankets and stretched out her aching legs.

'What gave you the crazy idea of reading yourself and Farid into the Wayless Wood? Why not arrive here? Dustfinger must have told the boy a few things about this world.'

'Orpheus's words.' Meggie couldn't help yawning. 'We only had Orpheus's words, and Dustfinger had got Orpheus to read him into the forest.'

'Of course. Sounds just like him.' She felt Fenoglio pulling the blankets up to her chin. 'I'd better not ask you who this Orpheus is. We'll talk again tomorrow. Sleep well. And welcome to my world!'

Meggie just managed to open her eyes once more. 'Where are you going to sleep?'

‘Don’t worry about me. A few of Minerva’s relations come in every night to share the family’s beds downstairs, and one more won’t make much difference. You soon get used to a little less comfort, I assure you. I only hope her husband doesn’t snore as loud as she says.’

Then he closed the door behind him, and Meggie heard him laboriously making his way down the steep wooden staircase, cursing quietly to himself. Mice scurried through the rafters over her head (at least, she hoped they were mice) and the voices of the sentries guarding the nearby city wall drifted in through the only window. Meggie closed her eyes. Her feet hurt, and the music from the strolling players’ camp was still ringing in her ears. The Black Prince, she thought, I’ve seen the Black Prince ... and the city gate of Ombra ... and I’ve heard the trees whispering to each other in the Wayless Wood. If she could only have told Resa all about it. Or Elinor. Or Mo. But more than likely Mo never wanted to hear another word about the Inkworld.

Meggie rubbed her tired eyes. Fairies’ nests clung to the beams in the roof above the bed, just as Fenoglio had always wanted, but nothing moved behind the dark entrance holes where the fairies flew into them. Fenoglio’s attic room was rather larger than the one where he and Meggie had been kept prisoner by Capricorn. As well as the bed he had so generously let her have, there was a wooden chest, a bench, and a writing-desk made of dark wood, gleaming and adorned with carvings. It did not go with the rest of the furniture: the roughly made bench, the simple chest. You might have thought it had strayed here out of another story, just like Meggie herself. An earthenware jug stood on it, containing a whole set of quill pens; there were two inkwells ...

Fenoglio was looking happy. He really was.

Meggie passed her arm over her tired face. The dress Resa had made her still smelled of her mother, but now it smelled of the Wayless Wood too. She put her hand inside the leather bag

that she had almost lost twice in the forest, and took out the notebook Mo had given her. The marbled binding was a mixture of deep blue and peacock green – Mo's favourite colours. It was good to have your books with you in strange places. Mo had told her that so often, but did he mean places like this? On their second day in the forest Meggie had tried to read the book she had brought with her, while Farid went hunting for a rabbit. She couldn't get past the first page, and finally she had forgotten the book and left it lying as she sat beside a stream with swarms of blue fairies hovering over it. Did your hunger for stories die down when you were in one yourself? Or had she just been too exhausted? I should at least write down what's happened so far, she thought, stroking the cover of her notebook again, but weariness was like cotton wool in her head and her limbs. Tomorrow, she thought. And tomorrow I'll tell Fenoglio that he must write me back home, too. I've seen the fairies, I've even seen the fire-elves, and the Wayless Wood and Ombra. Yes. Because, after all, it will take him a few days to find the right words ...

Something rustled in one of the fairies' nests above her. But no blue face looked out.

It was chilly in this room, and everything was strange – so strange. Meggie was used to strange places; after all, Mo had always taken her with him when he had to go away to cure sick books. But she could rely on one thing in all those places: she knew he was with her. Always. Meggie pressed her cheek against the rough straw mattress. She missed her mother and Elinor and Darius, but most of all she missed Mo. It was like an ache tugging at her heart. Love and a guilty conscience didn't mix. If only he had come too! He'd shown her so much of her own world, how she would have loved to show him this one! She knew he'd have liked it all: the fire-elves, the whispering trees, the camp of the strolling players ...

Oh, she did miss Mo.

How about Fenoglio? Wasn't there anyone he missed? Didn't he feel at all homesick for the village where he used to live, for his children, his friends and neighbours? What about his grandchildren? Meggie had often raced around his house with them! 'I'll show you everything tomorrow!' Fenoglio had whispered to her as they hurried after the boy ahead of them, carrying the torch which had almost burned down, and his voice had sounded as if he were a prince informing his guest that he would show him round the palace next day. 'The guards don't like people roaming the streets by night,' he had added, and it was indeed very quiet among the close-crammed houses. They reminded Meggie of Capricorn's village so much that she half expected to see one of the Black Jackets around some corner, leaning against the wall with a rifle in his hand. But all they met were a few pigs grunting as they wandered in the steep alleys, and a ragged man sweeping up the rubbish that lay among the houses and shovelling it into a handcart. 'You'll get used to the smell in time!' Fenoglio had whispered, as Meggie put her hand over her nose. 'Think yourself lucky I'm not lodging with a dyer, or over there with the tanners. Even I haven't got used to the stink of their trades.'

No, Meggie felt sure that Fenoglio didn't miss anything. Why would he? This was his world, born from his brain, as familiar to him as his own thoughts.

Meggie listened to the night. There was another sound as well as the rustle of the scurrying mice – a faint snoring. It seemed to come from the desk. Pushing back her blanket, she made her way cautiously over to it. A glass man was sleeping beside the jug of quill pens, his head on a tiny cushion. His transparent limbs were spattered with ink. Presumably he sharpened the pens, dipped them in the bulbous inkwells, sprinkled sand over the wet ink ... just as Fenoglio had always wanted. And did the fairies' nests above his bed really bring good luck and sweet dreams? Meggie thought she saw a trace of fairy dust on the desk. Thoughtfully, she ran her finger over it, looked at the

glittering dust left clinging to her fingertip, and rubbed it on her forehead. Did fairy dust cure homesickness?

For she was still homesick. All this beauty around her, yet she kept thinking of Elinor's house and Mo's workshop ... her heart was so stupid! Hadn't it always beat faster when Resa told her about the Inkworld? And now she was here, really here, it didn't seem to know just what it ought to feel. It's because the others aren't here too, something inside her whispered, as if her heart were trying to defend itself. Because they're none of them here.

If only Farid at least had stayed with her ... how she envied him the way he had slipped from one world to another as if he were just changing his shirt! The only longing he seemed to know was for the sight of Dustfinger's scarred face.

Meggie went to the window. There was only a piece of fabric tacked over it. Meggie pushed it aside and looked down into the narrow alley. The ragged refuse collector was just pushing his cart past with its heavy, stinking load. It nearly got stuck between the buildings. The windows above it were almost all dark; a candle burned behind only one of them, and a child's crying drifted out into the night. Roof stood next to roof like the scales of a fir-cone, and the walls and towers of the castle rose dark above them to the starry sky.

The Laughing Prince's castle. Resa had described it well. The moon stood pale above the grey battlements, outlining them in silver, them and the guards pacing up and down on the walls. It seemed to be the same as the moon that rose and set over the mountains behind Elinor's house. 'The Prince is holding festivities for his spoilt grandson,' Fenoglio had told Meggie, 'and I'm to go up to the castle with a new song. I'll take you with me. We'll have to find you a clean dress, but Minerva has three daughters. They're sure to have a dress among them to fit you.'

Meggie took one last look at the sleeping glass man and went back to the bed under the fairies' nests. After the celebrations, she thought as she pulled her dirty dress off over her head and slipped under the coarse blanket again, first thing after the celebrations I'll ask Fenoglio to write me home. As she closed her eyes, she once again saw the swarms of fairies who had swirled around her in the green twilight of the Wayless Wood, pulling her hair until Farid threw fir-cones at them. She heard the trees whispering in voices that seemed to be half earth, half air, she remembered the scaly faces she had seen in the water of dark pools, and the Black Prince too, and his bear ...

There was a rustling under the bed, and something crawled over her arm. Meggie sleepily brushed it off. I hope Mo isn't too angry, was the last thing she thought before she fell asleep and dreamed of Elinor's garden. Or was it the Wayless Wood?



16

Only a Lie

The blanket was there, but it was the boy's embrace that covered and warmed him.

**Jerry Spinelli,
*Maniac Magee***

Farid soon realized that Fenoglio was right. It had been stupid just to go off like that in the middle of the night. It was true that no robber leaped out at him from the darkness, and not even a fox crossed his path as he climbed the moonlit hill that the strolling players had pointed out to him, but which of the run-down farms lying among the black nocturnal trees was the right one? They all looked the same: a grey stone house, not much bigger than a hut, surrounded by olive trees, a well, sometimes a cowshed, a few narrow fields. Nothing stirred in the farmhouses. Their inhabitants were asleep, exhausted by hard work, and with every wall and every gate that he crept past Farid's hopes dwindled. Suddenly, and for the first time, he felt lost in this strange world, and he was about to curl up and go to sleep under a tree when he saw the fire.

It was burning brightly high up on the slope of the hill, red as a hibiscus flower opening and then fading even as it unfurls. Farid quickened his pace and hurried up the slope, his gaze fixed on the place where he had seen the blossoming flames.

Dustfinger! It shone among the trees again, sulphur yellow this time, bright as sunlight. It must be Dustfinger! Who else would make fire dance by night?

Farid went faster, so fast that he was soon struggling for breath. He came upon a path winding uphill, past the stumps of trees that had been felled only recently. The path was stony and wet with dew, but his bare feet were glad to be spared the prickly thyme for a while. There, another red flower blossoming in the darkness! Above him, a house emerged from the night. Beyond it the hill climbed on, terraced fields rose up the slope like steps, with stones piled up along their edges. The house itself looked as poor and plain as all the others. The path ended at a simple gateway and a wall of flat stones just high enough to reach Farid's chest. As he stood at the gate a goose went for him, flapping her wings and hissing like a snake, but Farid took no notice of her. He had found the man he was looking for.

Dustfinger was standing in the yard, making flowers of flame blossom in the air. They opened at a snap of his fingers, spread their fiery petals, faded, put out stems of burning gold, and burst into flower yet again. The fire seemed to come out of nowhere; Dustfinger had only to call it with his hands or his voice, he fanned the flames with nothing but his breath – no torches now, no bottle from which he filled his mouth – Farid could see none of the aids he had needed in the other world. He just stood there setting the night ablaze. More and more flowers swirled around him in their wild dance, spitting sparks at his feet like golden seed-corn, until he stood there bathed in liquid fire.

Farid had noticed often enough how peaceful Dustfinger's face became when he was playing with fire, but he had never seen him look so happy before. Just plain happy. The goose was still cackling, but Dustfinger seemed not to hear her. Only when Farid opened the gate did she scold so shrilly that he turned – and the fiery flowers went out as if night had crushed them in

black fingers. The happiness in Dustfinger's face was extinguished too.

At the door of the house, a woman stood up; she had probably been sitting on the doorstep. There was a boy there too; Farid hadn't noticed him before. The boy's gaze followed Farid as he crossed the yard, but Dustfinger still hadn't moved from the spot where he was standing. He just looked at Farid as the sparks went out at his feet, leaving nothing but a faint red glow behind.

Farid sought that familiar face for any welcome, any hint of a smile, but it showed only bewilderment. At last Farid's courage failed him, and he just stood there, with his heart trembling in his breast as if it were freezing cold.

'Farid?'

Dustfinger was coming towards him. The woman followed. She was very beautiful, but Farid ignored her. Dustfinger was wearing the clothes he always carried with him in the other world but had never worn. Black and red ... Farid dared not look at him when he stopped a pace away. He just stood there with his head bent, staring at his toes. Perhaps Dustfinger had never meant to take him along at all, perhaps he'd fixed it from the start that Cheeseface wouldn't read those final sentences, and now he was angry because Farid had followed him from one world to another all the same ... Would he beat him? He'd never beaten him yet, although he'd come close to it once when Farid accidentally set fire to Gwin's tail.

'How could I ever have believed that anything would stop you chasing after me?' Farid felt Dustfinger's hand raise his chin, and when he looked up, he saw at last what he had been hoping for in Dustfinger's eyes: joy. 'Where have you been hiding? I called you at least a dozen times, I looked for you ... the fire-elves must have thought me crazy!' He was scrutinizing Farid's face anxiously, as if he wasn't sure whether there was some change in it. It was so good to feel his concern. Farid

could have danced for joy, the way the fire had danced for Dustfinger just now.

‘Well, you seem to be the same as ever!’ said Dustfinger at last. ‘A skinny dark-eyed little devil. But wait – you’re so quiet! It didn’t cost you your voice, did it?’

Farid smiled. ‘No, I’m all right!’ he said, glancing quickly at the woman, who was still standing behind Dustfinger. ‘But it wasn’t Cheeseface who brought me here. He simply stopped reading the moment you were gone! Meggie read me here, using Cheeseface’s words.’

‘Meggie? Silvertongue’s daughter?’

‘Yes, but what about you? You’re all right, aren’t you?’

Dustfinger’s mouth twisted into the wry smile that Farid knew so well. ‘As you can see, the scars are still there. But there’s no more damage done, if that’s what you mean.’ He turned round and looked at the woman in a way that Farid didn’t like at all.

Her hair was black, and her eyes were almost as dark as his own. She really was very beautiful, even if she was old – well, much older than Farid – but he didn’t like her. He didn’t like either her or the boy. After all, he hadn’t followed Dustfinger to his own world just to share him.

The woman came up beside Dustfinger and placed her hand on his shoulder. ‘Who’s this?’ she asked, sizing Farid up in much the same way as he had looked at her. ‘One of your many secrets? A son I don’t know about?’

Farid felt the blood rise to his face. Dustfinger’s son. He liked the idea. Unobtrusively, he stole a look at the strange boy. Who was his father?

‘My son?’ Dustfinger affectionately caressed her face. ‘What an idea! No, Farid’s a fire-eater. He was my apprentice for a while, and now he thinks I can’t manage without him. Indeed,

he's so sure of it that he follows me everywhere, however far he has to go.'

'Oh, stop it!' Farid's voice sounded angrier than he had intended. 'I'm here to warn you! But I can go away again if you like.'

'Take it easy!' Dustfinger held him firmly by the arm as he turned to go. 'Heavens above, I forgot how quickly you take offence. Warn me? Warn me of what?'

'Basta.'

The woman's hand flew to her mouth when he said that name – and Farid began to tell his story, describing everything that had happened since Dustfinger disappeared from that remote road in the mountains as if he had never existed. When he had finished, Dustfinger asked just one question. 'So Basta has the book?'

Farid dug his toes into the hard earth and nodded. 'Yes,' he muttered ruefully. 'He put his knife to my throat. What was I to do?'

'Basta?' The woman reached for Dustfinger's hand. 'He's still alive, then?'

Dustfinger just nodded. Then he looked at Farid again. 'Do you believe he's here now? Do you think Orpheus has read him here?'

Farid shrugged helplessly. 'I don't know! When I got away from him he shouted after me that he'd be revenged on Silvertongue too. But Silvertongue doesn't believe it, he says Basta was just in a rage ...'

Dustfinger looked at the gate, which was still standing open. 'Yes, Basta says a lot of things when he's in a rage,' he murmured. Then he sighed, and trod out a few sparks that were still glowing on the ground in front of him.

'Bad news,' he said softly. 'Nothing but bad news. All we need now is for you to have brought Gwin with you.'

Thank heaven it was dark. Lies weren't nearly as easily spotted in the dark as by day. Farid did his best to sound as surprised as possible. 'Gwin? Oh no! No, I didn't bring him with me. You said he was to stay there. And Meggie said so too – she said I mustn't bring him.'

'Clever girl!' Dustfinger's sigh of relief went to Farid's heart.

'You left the marten behind?' The woman shook her head, as if she couldn't believe it. 'I always thought you loved that little monster more than any other living creature.'

'Oh, you know my faithless heart!' replied Dustfinger, but his light-hearted tone of voice couldn't deceive even Farid. 'Are you hungry?' he asked the boy. 'How long have you been here?'

Farid cleared his throat; his lie about Gwin was like a splinter lodged in it. 'For four days,' he managed to say. 'The strolling players gave us something to eat, but I'm still hungry, all the same ...'

'Us?' Dustfinger's voice suddenly sounded distrustful.

'Silvertongue's daughter. Meggie. She came with me.'

'She's here?' Dustfinger looked at him in astonishment. Then he groaned, and pushed the hair back from his forehead. 'Oh, how pleased her father will be! Not to mention her mother. Did you by any chance bring anyone else too?'

Farid shook his head.

'Where is she now?'

'With the old man.' Farid jerked his head back the way he had come. 'He's living near the castle. We met him in the strolling players' camp. Meggie was very glad to see him. She was going to look for him anyway, to get him to take her back. I think she's homesick ...'

'What old man? Who the devil are you talking about now?'

'Well, that writer! The one with the face like a tortoise – you remember, you ran away from him back then in—'

‘Yes, yes, all right!’ Dustfinger put his hand over Farid’s mouth as if he didn’t want to hear another word, and stared towards the place where, somewhere in the darkness, the walls of Ombra lay hidden. ‘Heavens above, what next?’ he murmured.

‘Is that ... is it more bad news?’ Farid hardly dared to ask.

Dustfinger looked away, but all the same Farid had seen his smile. ‘Oh, yes,’ he said. ‘I suppose there never was a boy who brought so much bad news all at once. And in the middle of the night too. What do we do with bearers of bad tidings, Roxane?’

Roxane. So that was her name. For a moment Farid thought she would suggest sending him away. But then she shrugged. ‘We feed them, what else?’ she said. ‘Even if this one doesn’t look too starved.’

A Present for Capricorn

‘If he has been my father’s enemy, I like him still less!’ exclaimed the now really anxious girl. ‘Will you not speak to him, Major Heyward, that I may hear his tones? Foolish though it may be, you have often heard me avow my faith in the tones of the human voice!’

**J. Fenimore Cooper,
*The Last of the Mohicans***

Evening drew on, night fell, and no one came to unlock Elinor’s cellar. They sat there in silence among tubes of tomato purée, cans of ravioli and all the other provisions stacked on the shelves around them – trying not to see the fear on each other’s faces.

‘My house isn’t all that large!’ said Elinor once, breaking the silence. ‘By now even that fool Basta should have realized that Meggie really isn’t here.’

No one replied. Resa was clinging to Mortimer as if that would protect him from Basta’s knife, and Darius was cleaning his already spotless glasses for the hundredth time. By the time footsteps finally approached the cellar door, Elinor’s watch had stopped. Memories flooded into her weary mind as she rose, with difficulty, from the container of olive oil on which she had

been sitting – memories of blank, windowless walls and musty straw. Her cellar was a more comfortable prison than Capricorn's sheds, let alone the crypt under his church, but the same man opened the door – and Elinor was just as much afraid of Basta in her own house.

When she had last seen him, he had been a prisoner himself, shut up in a cage by the master he adored. Had he forgotten that? How had Mortola persuaded him to serve her again in spite of it? The stupid idea of asking Basta didn't even cross Elinor's mind. She gave herself the answer: because a dog needs a master.

Basta had the man built like a wardrobe with him when he came to fetch them. There were four of them, after all, and Basta remembered only too well the day when Dustfinger had escaped him. 'Well, Silvertongue, I'm sorry it's taken some time,' he said in his soft, cat-like voice, as he pushed Mortimer down the corridor to Elinor's library. 'But Mortola just couldn't decide what kind of revenge to take, now that your witchy daughter really has run for it.'

'And what has she thought up?' asked Elinor, although she was afraid of the answer. Basta was only too willing to tell her.

'Well, first she was going to shoot you all and sink you in the lake, although we told her just burying you somewhere under the bushes out there would do. But then she decided it would be too merciful to let you die knowing the little witch has got away from her. No, Mortola really didn't fancy that idea.'

'Oh, didn't she?' Fear made Elinor's legs so heavy that she stopped walking until the wardrobe-man impatiently pushed her on. But before she could ask what Mortola was planning to do instead of shooting them, Basta was already opening the door of her library and ushering them in with an ironic bow.

Mortola was sitting enthroned in Elinor's favourite armchair. Scarcely a pace away from her lay a dog with running eyes and a head broad enough for you to rest a plate on it. Its forelegs

were bandaged, like Mortola's own legs, and there was a bandage around its belly too. A dog! In her library! Elinor tightened her lips. This is probably the least of your worries just now, Elinor, she told herself. You'd better just ignore it.

Mortola's stick was leaning against one of the glass cases in which Elinor kept her most valuable books. The moon-faced man stood beside the old woman. Orpheus – what did the fool think he was doing, claiming such a name for himself? Or had his parents in all seriousness given it to him? At any rate, he looked as if he too had passed a sleepless night, which gave Elinor a certain grim satisfaction.

'My son always said revenge was a dish best eaten cold,' observed Mortola, as she looked at her prisoners' exhausted faces. There was a pleased expression on her own. 'I admit I wasn't in any mood to take that advice yesterday. I'd have liked to see you all dead there and then, but the little witch's disappearing act has given me time to think, and I've decided to postpone my revenge for a while, so that I can enjoy it all the more, and in cold blood.'

'Hear, hear!' muttered Elinor, earning a thrust from the butt of Basta's rifle. But Mortola turned her birdlike gaze on Mortimer. She seemed to be seeing no one else: not Resa, not Darius, not Elinor, just him.

'Silvertongue!' She spoke the name with scorn. 'How many have you killed with your velvet voice? A dozen? Cockerell, Flatnose, and finally, your crowning achievement, my son.' The bitterness in Mortola's voice was as raw as if Capricorn had died only last night, instead of over a year ago. 'And you will die for killing him. You will die as sure as I'm sitting here, and I shall watch, as I had to watch the death of my son. But since I know from personal experience that nothing hurts more, in this or any other world, than the death of one's own child, I want you to see your daughter die before you die yourself.'

Mortimer stood there and didn't turn a hair. Usually you could see all his feelings in his face, but at this moment even Elinor couldn't have said what was going on inside him.

'She's gone, Mortola,' was all he said, hoarsely. 'Meggie's gone, and I don't think you can bring her back, or you'd have done it long ago, wouldn't you?'

'Who said anything about bringing her back?' Mortola's narrow lips twisted into a joyless smile. 'Do you think I intend to stay in this stupid world of yours any longer now I have the book? Why should I? No, I'm going to look for your daughter in my own world, where Basta will catch her like a little bird. And then I'll give the two of you to my son as a present. There'll be more festivities, Silvertongue, but this time Capricorn will not die. Oh no. He'll sit beside me and hold my hand while Death takes first your daughter, and then you. Yes, that's how it will be!'

Elinor glanced at Darius, and saw in his face the incredulous astonishment that she herself felt. But Mortola was smiling superciliously.

'Why are you staring at me like that? You think Capricorn is dead?' Mortola's voice almost cracked. 'Nonsense. Yes, he died here, but what does that mean? This world is a joke, a masquerade such as the strolling players perform in market places. In our world, the real world, Capricorn is still alive. That's why I got the book back from that fire-eater. The little witch said it herself, the night you killed him: he'll always be there as long as the book exists. Yes, I know she meant the fire-eater, but what's true of him is most certainly true of my son! They're still there, all of them: Capricorn and Flatnose, Cockerell and the Shadow!'

She looked triumphantly from one to another of them, but they all remained silent. Except for Mortimer. 'That's nonsense, Mortola!' he said. 'And you know it better than anyone. You

were in the Inkworld yourself when Capricorn disappeared from it, together with Basta and Dustfinger.'

'So? He went away, that's all.' Mortola's voice was shrill. 'And then he didn't come back, but that means nothing. My son was always travelling on business. The Adderhead sometimes sent him a messenger in the middle of the night when he needed his services, and then he'd be gone the next morning. But he's back now. Back and waiting for me to bring his murderer to his fortress in the Wayless Wood.'

Elinor felt a crazy urge to laugh, but fear closed her throat. There's no doubt about it, she thought, the old Magpie's lost her wits! Unfortunately that doesn't make her any less dangerous.

'Orpheus!' Mortola impatiently beckoned the moon-face to her side. Very slowly, as if to show that he obeyed her by no means as willingly as Basta did, he strolled over to her, taking a sheet of paper out of the inside pocket of his jacket as he did so. With a self-important expression, he unfolded it and laid it on the glass case with Mortola's stick leaning on it. The dog, panting, watched every movement he made.

'It won't be easy!' observed Orpheus as he leaned over the dog, affectionately patting its ugly head. 'I've never tried reading so many people over all at once before. Perhaps it would be a better idea to do it one by one—'

'No!' Mortola brusquely interrupted him. 'No, you'll read us all over at once, as we agreed.'

Orpheus shrugged. 'Very well, just as you like. As I said, it's risky because—'

'Be quiet! I don't want to hear this.' Mortola dug her bony fingers into the arms of the chair. (I'll never be able to sit in it again without thinking of her, thought Elinor.) 'May I remind you of that cell? I was the one who paid for its door to open. A word from me and you'll end up back there, without books or so much as a single sheet of paper. And, believe me, I'll make

sure you do just that if you fail. After all, you read the fire-eater over without much trouble, according to Basta.'

'Yes, but that was easy, very easy! Like putting something back in its proper place.' Orpheus looked out of Elinor's window as dreamily as if he were seeing Dustfinger vanish again, this time from the lawn outside. Frowning, he turned to Mortola. 'It's different with him,' he said, pointing to Mortimer. 'It's not his story. He doesn't belong in it.'

'Nor did his daughter. Are you saying she reads better than you?'

'Of course not!' Orpheus stood up very straight. 'No one reads better than me. Haven't I proved that? Didn't you yourself say Dustfinger spent ten years looking for someone to read him back?'

'Yes, very well. No more talk, then.' Mortola picked up her stick and rose to her feet, with difficulty. 'Wouldn't it be amusing if a ferocious cat slipped out of the pages, like the one that came through when the fire-eater left? Basta's hand hasn't healed yet, and *he* had a knife and the dog to help him.' She gave Elinor and Darius a nasty look.

Elinor took a step forward, ignoring the butt of Basta's rifle. 'What do you mean? I'm coming too, of course!'

Mortola raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. 'Oh, and who do you think decides that? Why would I want you with us? Or that stupid bungler Darius? I'm sure my son would have no objection to feeding you two to the Shadow as well, but I don't want to make things too difficult for Orpheus.' She pointed her stick at Mortimer. 'We're taking him with us. No one else.'

Resa was clinging to Mortimer's arm. Mortola went over to her, smiling. 'Yes, little pigeon, I'm leaving you here too!' she said, pinching her cheek hard. 'It will hurt if I take him away from you again, won't it? When you've only just got him back. After all those years ...'

Mortola signed to Basta, who reached roughly for Resa's arm. She struggled, still clinging to Mortimer, with a desperate expression on her face that went to Elinor's heart. But as she went to try and help Resa, the wardrobe-man barred her way. And Mortimer himself gently removed Resa's hand from his arm.

'It's all right,' he said. 'After all, I'm the only one in this family who hasn't been to the Inkworld yet. And I promise you I won't come back without Meggie.'

'Very true, because you won't come back at all!' Basta mocked, as he pushed Resa hard towards Elinor. And Mortola was still smiling. Elinor would have loved to hit her. Do something, Elinor! she thought. But what *could* she do? Hold on to Mortimer? Tear up the sheet of paper that the moon-face was so carefully smoothing out on her glass case?

'Well, can we begin now?' asked Orpheus, licking his lips as if he could hardly wait to demonstrate his skill again.

'Of course.' Mortola leaned heavily on her stick and beckoned Basta to her side.

Orpheus looked at him suspiciously. 'You'll make sure he leaves Dustfinger alone, right?' he said to Mortola. 'You promised!'

Basta passed a finger over his throat and winked at him.

'Did you see that?' Orpheus's beautiful voice broke. 'You promised! That was my one condition. You leave Dustfinger in peace or I don't read a single word!'

'Yes, yes, all right, don't shout like that or you'll ruin your voice,' replied Mortola impatiently. 'We have Silvertongue. Why would I be interested in that wretched fire-eater? Go on, start reading!'

'Hey, wait a minute!' This was the first time Elinor had heard the wardrobe-man's voice. It was curiously high for a man of

his size – as if an elephant were speaking in a cricket’s chirping voice. ‘What happens to the others when you’re gone?’

‘How should I know?’ Mortola shrugged. ‘Let whatever comes here to replace us eat them. Make the fat woman your maid and Darius your bootboy. Anything you like, it’s all the same to me. Just start reading!’

Orpheus obeyed. He went over to the glass case where the sheet of paper with his words on it was waiting, cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses.

‘Capricorn’s fortress lay in the forest where the first tracks of giants could be found.’ The words flowed over his lips like music. *‘It was a long time since anyone had seen the giants, but other and more alarming beings haunted the walls by night – Night-Mares and Redcaps, creatures as cruel as the men who had built the fortress. It was all of grey stone, as grey as the rocky slope behind it ...’*

Do something! thought Elinor. Do something, it’s now or never, snatch that piece of paper from the moon-faced man’s hand, kick the Magpie’s stick away ... but she couldn’t move a muscle.

What a voice! And the magic of the words – they slowed her brain, making her drowsy with delight. When Orpheus read of prickly woodbine and tamarisk flowers, Elinor thought she could smell them. *He really does read as well as Mortimer!* That was the only thought of her own that would form in her head. And the others were no better off, they were all staring at Orpheus’s lips as if they could hardly wait for the next word: Darius, Basta, the wardrobe-man, even Mortimer – why, even the Magpie. They listened motionless, caught up in the sound of the words. Only one of them moved. Resa. Elinor saw her struggling against the magic as you might struggle in deep water, finally coming up behind Mortimer and flinging her arms around him.

And then they had all disappeared: Basta, Mortola the Magpie – and Mortimer and Resa.

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18

Mortola's Revenge

I do not dare,
I do not dare to write it,
if you die.

Pablo Neruda,
'The Dead Woman',
The Captain's Verses

It was as if a transparent picture, like stained glass, came down over what Resa had just been seeing – Elinor's library, the backs of the books so carefully classified by Darius and ranged side by side – blurring it all, while the other picture itself became clearer. Stones eroded the books; soot-blackened walls replaced the bookshelves. Grass sprouted from Elinor's wooden floorboards, and the white plaster of the ceiling gave way to a sky covered by dark clouds.

Resa's arms were still wound around Mo. He was the only thing that didn't disappear, and she wouldn't let go of him for fear of losing him again after all, as she had lost him once before. So long ago.

'Resa?' She saw the alarm in his eyes as he turned and realized that she had come too. Quickly, she put her hand over his mouth. Honeysuckle climbed up the black walls on their left. Mo put out his hand to the leaves, as if his fingers must feel

what his eyes had already seen. Resa remembered that she had once done the same, touching everything, bewildered to find the world beyond the letters on the page so real.

If she hadn't heard the words Orpheus had spoken for herself, Resa wouldn't have known where Mortola had made him read them all. Capricorn's fortress had looked so different when she had last stood in its courtyard. There had been men everywhere, armed men on the flights of steps, at the gate, on the wall. Where the bakehouse had stood there was nothing now but charred beams, and it was by the stairway over there that she and the other maids used to beat the dust from the tapestry hangings, tapestries which Mortola placed on the walls of the bare rooms only on special occasions.

Those rooms were gone. The walls of the fortress were crumbling and black from fire. Soot covered the stones as if someone had painted them with a black brush, and yarrow grew all over the once bare courtyard. Yarrow loved burned earth; it grew everywhere. Where a narrow stairway had once led up to the watch-tower, the forest was now making its way into Capricorn's den. Young trees had taken root among the ruins, as if they had been just waiting to reclaim the place occupied by this human abode. Thistles grew in the gaping cavities of the windows, moss covered the ruined stairs, and ivy climbed to the charred wooden stumps that had once been Capricorn's gallows. Resa had seen many men hanging on them.

'What's this?' Mortola's voice echoed from the dead walls. 'What are these miserable ruins? This isn't my son's fortress!'

Resa drew closer to Mo's side. He still seemed numbed, almost as if he were waiting for the moment when he would wake up and see Elinor's books again instead of the stones. Resa knew only too well how he was feeling. It was not so bad for her this second time; after all, she wasn't alone now, and she knew what had happened. But Mo seemed to have forgotten everything: Mortola, Basta – and why they had brought him here. Resa, however, had not forgotten, and she watched with a

thudding heart as Mortola stumbled through the yarrow to the charred walls and felt the stones, as if she were running her fingers over her dead son's face.

'I'll cut that man Orpheus's tongue out with my own hands and serve it for supper!' she exclaimed. 'With chopped foxglove! Is this supposed to be my son's fortress? Never!'

Her head moved frantically back and forth like a bird's as she looked around her. But Basta just stood there in silence, pointing his gun at Resa and Mo.

'Well, say something!' shouted the Magpie. 'Say something, you fool!'

Basta bent down and picked up a rusty helmet lying at his feet. 'What do you expect me to say?' he growled, throwing the helmet back into the grass with a gloomy expression, and giving it a kick that sent it clattering against the wall. 'Of course it's our castle. Didn't you see the figure of the goat on the wall there? Even the carved devils are still standing, though they wear ivy crowns now – and look, there's one of the eyes that Slasher liked to paint on the stones.'

Mortola stared at the red eye to which Basta was pointing. Then she hobbled over to the remains of the wooden gate, now splintered, torn off its hinges, and barely visible under the brambles and tall stinging nettles. She stood there in silence, looking round her. As for Mo, he had finally come back to his senses.

'What are they talking about?' he whispered to Resa. 'Where are we? Was this where Capricorn used to hide out?'

Resa just nodded. However, the Magpie turned at the sound of Mo's voice and stared at him. Then she came over to him, stumbling as if she felt dizzy.

'Yes, this is his castle, but Capricorn isn't here!' she said in a dangerously low voice. 'My son is not here. So Basta was right after all. He's dead, here and in the other world too, dead, and what killed him? Your voice, your accursed voice!' There was

such hatred in her face that Resa instinctively tried to draw Mo away, somewhere, anywhere he would be safe from that glance. But there was nothing behind them except the sooty wall with the figure of Capricorn's goat still displayed on it, a red-eyed goat with burning horns.

'Silvertongue!' Mortola spat the word out as if it were poison. 'Killertongue suits you better. Your daughter couldn't bring herself to utter the words that killed my son, but you – oh, you didn't hesitate for a moment!' Her voice was little more than a whisper as she went on: 'I can still see you before me, as if it had happened only last night – taking the piece of paper from her hand and putting her aside. And then the words came out of your mouth, fine-sounding as everything you say, and when you'd finished my son lay dead in the dust.' For a moment she put her fingers to her mouth as if to suppress a sob. When she let her hand drop again, her lips were still quivering.

'How – how can this be?' she went on, in a trembling voice. 'Tell me, how is it possible? He didn't belong in your false world at all. So how could he die there? Was that the only reason you lured him over with your wicked tongue?' And again she turned and stared at the burned walls, her bony hands clenched into fists.

Basta bent down again. This time he picked up an arrow point. 'I'd really like to know what happened!' he muttered. 'I always said Capricorn wasn't here, but what about the others? Firefox, Pitch-Eater, Humpback, the Piper, Slasher ... are they all dead? Or are they in the Laughing Prince's dungeon?' He looked uneasily at Mortola. 'What are we going to do if they're all gone?' Basta sounded like a boy afraid of the dark. 'Do you want us to live in a cave like brownies until the wolves find us? Have you forgotten the wolves? And the Night-Mares, the fire-elves, all the other creatures crawling around the place ... I for one haven't forgotten them, but you *would* come back to this accursed spot where there are three ghosts lurking behind every

tree!’ He reached for the amulet dangling around his neck, but Mortola did not deign to look at him.

‘Oh, be quiet!’ she said, so sharply that Basta flinched. ‘How often must I tell you that ghosts are nothing to be afraid of? As for wolves, that’s why you carry a knife, isn’t it? We’ll manage. We managed in their world, and we know our way around in this one a good deal better. And, don’t forget, we have a powerful friend here. We’re going to pay him a visit, yes, that’s what. But first I have something else to do, something I should have done long ago.’ And again her eyes were on Mo. On him and no one else. Then she turned, walked steadily up to Basta and took the rifle from his hand.

Resa reached for Mo’s arm and tried to pull him aside, but Mortola was too quick on the draw. The Magpie had some skill with a gun. She had often shot at the birds who pecked the seed from her garden beds, back in Capricorn’s yard. Blood spread over Mo’s shirt like a flower blossoming, red, crimson. Resa heard herself scream as he fell and suddenly lay there motionless, while the grass around him turned as red as his shirt. She flung herself down on her knees, turned him over, and pressed her hands to the wound as if she could hold back the blood, all the blood carrying his life away ...

‘Come along, Basta!’ she heard Mortola say. ‘We have a long way to go, and it’s time we found safe shelter before it gets dark. This forest is not a pleasant place by night.’

‘You’re going to leave them here?’ That was Basta’s voice.

‘Why not? I know you always fancied her, but the wolves will take care of them. The fresh blood will bring them this way.’

The blood. It was still flowing so fast, and Mo’s face was white as a sheet. ‘No. Oh, please, no!’ whispered Resa. Aloud, in her own voice. She pressed her fingers to her shaking lips.

‘Well, what do you know? Our little pigeon can speak again!’ Basta’s mocking voice hardly penetrated the rushing in her ears. ‘What a pity he can’t hear you any more, eh? So long, Resa!’

She did not look round. Not even when their footsteps died away. 'No!' she heard herself whispering again and again. 'No!' like a prayer. She tore a strip of fabric from her dress – if only her fingers weren't shaking so badly – and pressed it to the wound. Her hands were wet with his blood and her own tears. Resa, she told herself sternly, crying won't do him any good. Try to remember! What did Capricorn's men do when they were wounded? They cauterized the wound, but she didn't want to think of that. There had been a plant too, a plant with hairy leaves and pale mauve flowers, tiny bells into which bumble bees flew, buzzing. She looked around, through the veil of tears over her eyes, as if hoping for a miracle ...

Two blue-skinned fairies were hovering among the twining honeysuckle. If Dustfinger had been here now, he'd surely have known how to entice them. He'd have called to them softly, persuaded them to give him some of their fairy spit, or the silvery dust that they shook out of their hair.

She heard her own sobbing again. She lifted the dark hair back from Mo's brow with her blood-stained fingers, called him by name. He couldn't be gone, not now, not after all those years ...

Over and over she called his name, put her fingers on his lips, felt his breath, shallow and irregular, coming with difficulty as if someone were sitting on his chest. Death, she thought, it's Death ...

A sound made her jump. Footsteps on soft leaves. Had Mortola changed her mind? Had she sent Basta back to fetch them? Or were the wolves coming? If only she at least had a knife. Mo always carried one. Feverishly, she put her hands in his trouser pockets, feeling for the smooth handle ...

The footsteps grew louder. Yes, they were human footsteps, no doubt about it. And then suddenly all was still. Menacingly still. Resa felt the handle in her fingers. She quickly removed

the knife from Mo's pocket and snapped it open. She hardly dared to turn, but at last she did.

An old woman was standing in what had once been Capricorn's gateway. She looked as small as a child among the pillars that still stood erect. She had a sack slung over her shoulder and was wearing a dress that looked as if she had woven it from nettles. Her skin was burned brown, her face furrowed like the bark of a tree. Her grey hair was as short as a marten's fur, and had leaves and burrs clinging to it. Without a word, she came towards Resa. Her feet were bare, but she didn't seem to mind the nettles and thistles growing in the courtyard of the ruined fortress. Her face expressionless, she pushed Resa aside and bent over Mo. Unmoved, she lifted the bloody scraps of fabric that Resa was still pressing to the wound.

'I never saw a wound like that before,' she remarked, in a voice that sounded hoarse, as if it wasn't often used. 'What did it?'

'A gun,' replied Resa. It felt strange to be speaking with her tongue again instead of her hands.

'A gun?' The old woman looked at her, shook her head, and bent over Mo again. 'A gun. What may that be?' she murmured as her brown fingers felt the wound. 'Dear me, these days they go inventing new weapons faster than a chick hatches from its egg, and I have to find out how to mend what they stab and cut.' She put her ear to Mo's chest, listened, and straightened up again with a sigh. 'Are you wearing something under that dress?' she asked abruptly, without looking at Resa. 'Take it off and tear it up. I need long strips.' Then she put her hand into a leather bag at her belt, took out a little bottle, and used its contents to soak one of the strips of fabric that Resa was offering her. 'Press that down on it!' she said, handing the fabric back to Resa. 'This is a bad wound. I may have to cut or cauterize it, but not here. The two of us can't carry him on our own, but the strolling players have a camp not far off, for their

old and sick people. I may find help there.’ She dressed the wound with fingers as nimble as if she had never done anything else. ‘Keep him warm!’ she said as she rose to her feet again and slung the sack over her shoulder. Then she pointed to the knife that Resa had dropped in the grass. ‘Keep that with you. I’ll try to be back before the wolves get here. And if one of the White Women turns up, make sure she doesn’t look at him or whisper his name.’

Then she was gone, as suddenly as she had come. And Resa knelt there in the courtyard of Capricorn’s fortress, her hand pressed down on the blood-soaked dressing, and listened to Mo’s breathing.

‘Can you hear me? My voice is back,’ she whispered to him. ‘Just as if it had been waiting for you here.’ But Mo did not move. His face was as pale as if the stones and grass had drunk all his blood.

Resa didn’t know how much time had passed when she heard the whispering behind her, incomprehensible and soft as rain. When she looked around, there stood the figure on the ruined stairway. A White Woman, blurred as a reflection on water. Resa knew only too well what such an apparition meant. She had told Meggie about the White Women often enough. Only one thing lured them, and faster than blood lured the wolves: failing breath, a heart beating ever more feebly ...

‘Be quiet!’ Resa shouted at the pale figure, bending protectively over Mo’s face. ‘Go away, and don’t you dare look at him. He isn’t going with you, not today!’ They whisper your name if they want to take you with them, so Dustfinger had told her. But they don’t know Mo’s name, thought Resa. They can’t know it, because he doesn’t belong here. All the same, she held her hands over his ears.

The sun was beginning to set. It sank inexorably behind the trees. Darkness fell between the charred walls, and the pale

figure on the stairs stood out more clearly all the time. It stood there motionless, waiting.

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Birthday Morning

‘Nay, not without a wound in the spirit shall I leave this city ... Too many fragments of the spirit have I scattered in these streets, and too many are the children of my longing that walk naked among these hills ...’

**Khalil Gibran,
*The Prophet***

Meggie woke with a start. She had been dreaming, and her dreams had been bad, but she didn’t remember what they were about, only the fear they left behind like a knife wound in the heart. Noise came to her ears, shouting and loud laughter, children’s voices, the barking of dogs, the grunting of pigs, hammering, sawing. She felt sunlight on her face, and the air she was breathing smelled of dung and freshly baked bread. Where was she? Only when she saw Fenoglio sitting at his writing-desk did she remember. Ombra – she was in Ombra.

‘Good morning!’ Fenoglio had obviously slept extremely well. He looked very pleased with himself and the world in general. Well, who should be pleased with it if not the man who made it up? The glass man Meggie had seen last night, asleep beside the jug of quill pens, was standing beside him.

‘Say hello to our guest, Rosenquartz!’ Fenoglio told him.

The glass man bowed stiffly in Meggie's direction, took Fenoglio's dripping pen, wiped it on a rag and put it back in the jug with the others. Then he bent to look at what Fenoglio had written. 'Ah. Not a song about this Bluejay for a change!' he snapped. 'Are you taking this one up to the castle today?'

'I am indeed,' said Fenoglio loftily. 'Now, do please make sure the ink doesn't run.'

The glass man wrinkled his nose, as if he had never allowed such a thing to happen, put both hands into the bowl of sand standing next to the pens, and scattered the fine grains over the freshly written parchment with practised energy.

'Rosenquartz, how often do I have to tell you?' snapped Fenoglio. 'Too much sand, too much energy. That way you'll smudge everything.'

The glass man brushed a couple of grains of sand off his hands and folded his arms, looking injured. 'Then you do better!' His voice reminded Meggie of the noise you make tapping a glass with your fingernails. 'I'd certainly like to see that!' he added sharply, examining Fenoglio's clumsy fingers with such scorn that Meggie had to laugh.

'Me too!' she said, pulling her dress on over her head. A few withered flowers from the Wayless Wood still clung to it, and Meggie couldn't help thinking of Farid. Had he found Dustfinger?

'Hear that?' Rosenquartz cast her a friendly glance. 'She sounds like a clever girl.'

'Oh yes, Meggie's very clever,' replied Fenoglio. 'The two of us have been through a lot together. It's thanks to her that I'm sitting here now, trying to tell a glass man the right way to scatter sand over ink.'

Rosenquartz looked curiously at Meggie, but he didn't ask what Fenoglio's mysterious comment meant. Meggie went up to the desk and looked over the old man's shoulder. 'Your handwriting's easier to read these days,' she said.

‘Thank you very much,’ murmured Fenoglio. ‘You should know. But look – do you see that smudged P?’

‘If you are seriously suggesting that I’m to blame for it,’ said Rosenquartz in his ringing little voice, ‘then this is the last time I hold your pens for you, and I’m going straight off to look for a scribe who won’t expect me to work before breakfast.’

‘All right, all right, I’m not blaming you. I smudged the P myself!’ Fenoglio winked at Meggie. ‘He’s easily offended,’ he whispered confidentially to her. ‘His pride is as fragile as his limbs.’

The glass man turned his back on Fenoglio without a word, picked up the rag he had used to clean the pen, and tried to wipe a still-damp inkspot off his arm. His limbs were not entirely colourless, like those of the glass people who had lived in Elinor’s garden. Everything about him was pale pink, like the flowers of a wild rose. Only his hair was slightly darker.

‘You didn’t say anything about my new song,’ Fenoglio pointed out. ‘Wonderful, don’t you agree?’

‘Not bad,’ replied Rosenquartz without turning round, and he began polishing up his feet.

‘Not bad? It’s a masterpiece, you maggot-coloured, ink-smudging pen-holder!’ Fenoglio struck the desk so hard that the glass man fell over on his back like a beetle. ‘I’m going to market today to get a new glass man, one who knows about these things and will appreciate my robber songs too!’ He opened a longish box and took out a stick of sealing wax. ‘At least you haven’t forgotten to get a flame for the wax this time!’ he growled.

Rosenquartz snatched the sealing wax from his hand and held it in the flame of the candle that stood beside the jug. His face expressionless, he placed the melting end of the wax on the parchment roll, waved his glass hand over the red seal a couple of times, and then cast Fenoglio an imperious glance,

whereupon Fenoglio solemnly pressed the ring he wore on his middle finger down on to the soft wax.

‘F for Fenoglio, F for fantasy, F for fabulous,’ he announced. ‘There we are.’

‘B for breakfast would sound better just now,’ said Rosenquartz, but Fenoglio ignored this remark.

‘What did you think of the song for the Prince?’ he asked Meggie.

‘I ... er ... I couldn’t read it all because you two were quarrelling,’ she said evasively. She didn’t want to make Fenoglio even gloomier by saying that the lines struck her as familiar. ‘Why does the Laughing Prince want such a sad poem?’ she asked instead.

‘Because his son is dead,’ replied Fenoglio. ‘One sad song after another, that’s all he wants to hear since Cosimo’s death. I’m tired of it!’ Sighing, he put the parchment back on his desk and went over to the chest standing under the window.

‘Cosimo? Cosimo the Fair is dead?’ Meggie couldn’t conceal her disappointment. Resa had told her so much about the Laughing Prince’s son: everyone who saw him loved him, even the Adderhead feared him, his peasants brought their sick children to him because they believed anyone as beautiful as an angel could cure all sicknesses too ...

Fenoglio sighed. ‘Yes, it’s terrible. And a bitter lesson. This story isn’t my story any more! It’s developed a will of its own.’

‘Oh no, here we go again!’ Rosenquartz groaned. ‘His story! I’ll never understand all this talk. Maybe you really ought to go and see one of those physicians who cure sick minds.’

‘My dear Rosenquartz,’ Fenoglio replied, ‘all this talk, as you call it, is above your transparent little head. But believe me, Meggie knows just what I’m talking about!’ He opened the chest, looking cross, and took out a long, dark blue robe. ‘I ought to get a new one made,’ he muttered. ‘Yes, I definitely

ought to. This is no robe for a man whose words are sung up and down the land, a man commissioned by a prince to put his grief for his son into words! Just look at the sleeves! Holes everywhere. In spite of Minerva's sprigs of lavender, the moths have been at it.'

'It's good enough for a poor poet,' remarked the glass man in matter-of-fact tones.

Fenoglio put the robe back in the chest and let the lid fall into place with a dull thud. 'One of these days,' he said, 'I am going to throw something really hard at you!'

This threat did not seem to bother Rosenquartz unduly. The two went on wrangling about this and that; it seemed to be a kind of game they played, and they had obviously forgotten Meggie's presence entirely. She went to the window, pushed aside the fabric over it and looked out. It was going to be a sunny day, although mist still lingered above the hills surrounding the city. Which was the hill where the house of the minstrel woman stood, the place where Farid hoped to find Dustfinger? She had forgotten. Would he come back if he actually found the fire-eater, or would he just go off with him, like last time, forgetting that she was here too? Meggie didn't even try to work out just how that idea made her feel. There was enough turmoil in her heart already, so much turmoil that she'd have liked to ask Fenoglio for a mirror, just to see herself for a moment – her own familiar face amidst all the strangeness surrounding her, all the strange feelings in her heart. But instead she let her gaze wander over the misty hills.

How far did Fenoglio's world go? Just as far as he had described it? 'Interesting!' he had whispered, back when Basta had dragged the two of them off to Capricorn's village. 'Do you know, this place is very like one of the settings I thought up for *Inkheart*?' It must have been Ombra he meant. The hills around Ombra really did look like those over which Meggie had escaped with Mo and Elinor when Dustfinger set them free from Capricorn's dungeons, except that these seemed even greener, if

that was possible, and more enchanted. As if every leaf suggested that fairies and fire-elves lived under the trees. And the houses and streets you could see from Fenoglio's room might have been in Capricorn's village, if they hadn't been so much noisier and more colourful.

'Just look at the crowds – they all want to go up to the castle today,' said Fenoglio behind her. 'Travelling pedlars, peasants, craftsmen, rich merchants, beggars, they'll all be going there to celebrate the birthday, to earn or spend a few coins, to enjoy themselves, and most of all to stare at the grand folk.'

Meggie looked at the castle walls. They rose above the russet rooftops almost menacingly. Black banners on the towers flapped in the wind.

'How long has Cosimo been dead?'

'Hardly a year yet. I'd just moved into this room. As you can imagine, your voice took me straight to where it plucked the Shadow out of the story: the middle of Capricorn's fortress. Fortunately, all was hopeless confusion there because the monstrous Shadow had disappeared, and none of the fire-raisers noticed an old man suddenly standing among them looking foolish. I spent a couple of dreadful days in the forest, and unfortunately I didn't, like you, have a clever companion who could use a knife, catch rabbits, and kindle fire with a couple of dry twigs. But the Black Prince himself finally picked me up – imagine how I stared when he was suddenly there in front of me. I didn't think I knew any of the men who were with him, but I'll admit that I could never remember the minor characters in my stories very clearly – only vaguely, if at all.

'Well, be that as it may, one of them took me to Ombra, ragged and destitute as I was. But luckily I had a ring that I could sell. A goldsmith gave me enough for it to allow me to rent this room from Minerva, and all seemed to be going well. Very well indeed, in fact. I thought up stories, and stories about stories, better than any I'd made up for a long time. The words

came pouring out of me, but when I'd only just made my name with the first songs I wrote for the Laughing Prince, when the strolling players had just begun to find that they liked my verses, Firefox goes and burns down a few farms by the river – and Cosimo the Fair sets out to put an end to Firefox and his gang once and for all. Good, I thought, why not? How was I to guess that he'd get himself killed? I had such plans for him! He was to be a truly great prince, a blessing to his subjects, and my story was going to give them a happy ending when he freed this world from the Adderhead. But instead he gets himself killed by a band of fire-raisers in the Wayless Wood!'

Fenoglio sighed.

'At first his father wouldn't believe he was dead. For Cosimo's face was badly burned, like those of all the other dead who were brought back. The fire had done its work, but when months passed, and still he didn't return ...' Fenoglio sighed again, and once more looked in the chest where the moth-eaten robe lay. He handed Meggie two long, pale blue woollen stockings, a couple of leather straps, and a much-washed, dark blue dress. 'I'm afraid this will be too big for you – it belongs to Minerva's second daughter, and she's the same size as her mother,' he said, 'but what you're wearing now urgently needs a wash. You can keep the stockings up with those garters – not very comfortable, but you'll get used to it. Good Lord, you really have grown, Meggie,' he said, turning his back to her as she changed her clothes. 'Rosenquartz! You turn round too!'

It was true that the dress didn't fit particularly well, and Meggie suddenly felt almost glad that Fenoglio had no mirror. At home she had been studying her reflection quite often recently. It was odd to watch your own body changing as if you were a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis.

'Ready?' asked Fenoglio, turning round. 'Ah well, that'll do, although such a pretty girl really deserves a prettier dress.' He looked down at himself, and sighed. 'I think I'd better stay as I am; at least this robe doesn't have any holes in it. And what

does it matter? The castle will be swarming with entertainers and fine folk today, so no one will take any notice of the two of us.'

'Two? What do you mean?' Rosenquartz put down the blade he had been using to sharpen a pen. 'Aren't you going to take me with you?'

'Are you crazy? Just for me to carry you back in pieces? No. Anyway, you'd have to listen to that bad poem I'm taking to the Prince.'

Rosenquartz was still grumbling as Fenoglio closed the door behind them. The wooden staircase that Meggie had hardly been able to climb last night, exhausted as she was, led down to a yard surrounded by houses, with pigsties, woodsheds and vegetable plots competing for what little space was left. A narrow little stream wound its way through the yard, two children were shooing a pig away from the vegetable beds, and a woman with a baby in her arms was feeding a flock of skinny hens.

'A wonderful morning, isn't it, Minerva?' Fenoglio called to her, as Meggie hesitantly followed him down the last steep steps.

Minerva came to the foot of the stairs. A girl of perhaps six was clinging to her skirt, and stared suspiciously at Meggie. She stopped, feeling unsure of herself. Perhaps they can see it, she thought, perhaps they can see I don't belong here ...

'Watch out!' the little girl called, but before Meggie realized what she meant, something was pulling her hair. The little girl threw a clod of earth, and a fairy fluttered away empty-handed, scolding crossly.

'Good heavens, where are you from?' asked Minerva, helping Meggie down from the steps. 'Aren't there any fairies there? They're crazy for human hair, particularly when it's as pretty as yours. If you don't pin it up you'll soon be bald. And anyway,

you're too old to wear it loose, not unless you want to be taken for one of the strolling players.'

Minerva was small and stocky, not much taller than Meggie. 'My word, how thin you are!' she said. 'That dress is almost slipping off your shoulders. I'll take it in for you this evening. Has she had any breakfast?' she asked, and shook her head at the sight of Fenoglio's baffled expression. 'Dear Lord, surely you didn't forget to give the girl something to eat?'

Fenoglio helplessly raised his hands. 'I'm an old man, Minerva!' he cried. 'I do forget things! What's the matter with everyone this morning? I was in such a good mood, but you all keep going on like this. Rosenquartz has already been infuriating me.'

By way of answer Minerva dumped the baby in his arms and led Meggie off with her.

'And whose baby is this?' enquired Fenoglio, following her. 'Aren't there enough children running about the place already?'

'It's my eldest daughter's,' was all Minerva replied, 'and you've seen it a couple of times before. Are you getting so forgetful that I'll have to introduce my own children to you?'

Minerva's younger children were called Despina and Ivo; Ivo was the boy who had been carrying Fenoglio's torch last night. He smiled at Meggie as she and his mother came into the kitchen. Minerva made Meggie eat a plate of polenta and two slices of bread spread with a paste that smelled of olives. The milk she gave her was so rich that Meggie's tongue felt coated with cream after the first sip. As she ate, Minerva pinned her hair up for her. Meggie scarcely recognized herself when Minerva pushed a bowl of water over to her so that she could see her reflection.

'Where did you get those boots?' asked Ivo. His sister was still inspecting Meggie like some strange animal that had lost its way and wandered into their kitchen. Where indeed? Meggie

hastily tried to pull the dress down to hide her boots, but it was too short.

‘Meggie comes from far away,’ explained Fenoglio, who had noticed her confusion. ‘Very far away. A place where there are people with three legs, and others whose noses grow on their chins.’

The children stared first at him and then at Meggie.

‘Oh, stop it! What nonsense you do talk!’ Minerva lightly cuffed the back of his head. ‘They believe every word you say. One of these days they’ll be setting off to look for all the crazy places you tell them about, and I’ll be left childless.’

Meggie almost choked on the rich milk. She had quite forgotten her homesickness, but Minerva’s words brought it back – and her guilty conscience too. She had been away from home five days now, if she’d been keeping count correctly.

‘You and your stories!’ Minerva handed Fenoglio a mug of milk. ‘As if it wasn’t enough for you to keep telling them those robber tales. Do you know what Ivo said to me yesterday? When I’m grown up I’m going to join the robbers too! He wants to be like the Bluejay! What do you think you’re doing, pray? Tell them about Cosimo for all I care, tell them about the giants, or the Black Prince and his bear, but not another word about that Bluejay, understand?’

‘Yes, yes, not another word,’ muttered Fenoglio. ‘But don’t blame me if the boy picks up one of the songs about him from somewhere. Everyone’s singing them.’

Meggie had no idea what they were talking about, but in her mind she was already up at the castle anyway. Resa had told her that the birds’ nests clustered together on its walls so thickly that sometimes the twittering drowned out the minstrels’ songs. And fairies nested there too, she said, fairies who were pale grey like the stone of the castle walls because they often nibbled human food, instead of living on flowers and fruits like their sisters in the wild. And there were said to be

trees in the Inner Courtyard of the castle that grew nowhere else except in the very heart of the Wayless Wood, trees with leaves that murmured in the wind like a chorus of human voices, and foretold the future on moonless nights – but in a language that no one could understand.

‘Would you like anything else to eat?’

Meggie started, and came down to earth again.

‘Inky infernos!’ Fenoglio rose and handed the baby back to Minerva. ‘Do you want to fatten her up until she fits into that dress? We must be off, or we’ll miss half of it. The Prince has asked me to bring him the new song before midday, and you know he doesn’t like people to be late.’

‘No, I don’t know any such thing,’ replied Minerva grumpily, as Fenoglio propelled Meggie towards the door. ‘Because I don’t go in and out of the castle the way you do. What does our fine prince want from you this time – another lament?’

‘Yes, I’ve had enough of them too, but he pays well. Would you rather I was penniless and you had to look for a new lodger?’

‘Very well, very well,’ grumbled Minerva, clearing the children’s empty bowls off the table. ‘I tell you what, though: this prince of ours will sigh and lament himself to death, and then the Adderhead will send his men-at-arms. They’ll settle here like flies on fresh horse dung, on the excuse of just wanting to protect their master’s poor fatherless grandson.’

Fenoglio turned so abruptly that he almost sent Meggie flying. ‘No, Minerva. No!’ he said firmly. ‘That won’t happen. Not as long as I live – which I hope will be a very long time yet!’

‘Oh yes?’ Minerva removed her son’s fingers from the tub of butter. ‘And how are you going to prevent it? With your robber songs? Do you think some fool with a feathered mask, playing the hero because he’s listened to your songs too often, can keep the men-at-arms away from our city? Heroes end up on the

gallows, Fenoglio,' she continued, lowering her voice, and Meggie could hear the fear behind her mockery. 'It may be different in your songs, but in real life princes hang them, and the finest of words don't change that.'

The two children looked uneasily at their mother, and Minerva stroked their hair as if that would wipe away her own words. But Fenoglio merely shrugged. 'Oh, come on, you see everything in such dismal hues!' he said. 'You underestimate the power of words, believe me! They are strong, stronger than you think. Ask Meggie!'

But before Minerva could do just that, he was pushing Meggie out of the house. 'Ivo, Despina, do you want to come?' he called to the children. 'I'll bring them home safe and sound. I always do!' he added, as Minerva's anxious face appeared in the doorway. 'The best entertainers far and wide will be at the castle today. They'll have come from very far away. Your two can't miss this chance!'

As soon as they stepped out of the alley, they were caught up in the crowd streaming along. People came thronging up from all sides: shabbily dressed peasants, beggars, women with children, and men whose wealth showed not only in the magnificence of their embroidered sleeves, but most of all in the servants who roughly forced a path through the crowd for them. Riders drove their horses through the throng without a thought for those they pushed against the walls; litters were jammed in the crush of bodies, however angrily the litter-bearers cursed and shouted.

'Devil take it, this is worse than a market day!' Fenoglio shouted to Meggie above the heads around them. Ivo darted through the crowd, quick as a herring in the sea, but Despina looked so alarmed that Fenoglio finally put her up on his shoulders before she was squashed between baskets and people's bellies. Meggie felt her own heart beat faster, what

with all the confusion, the pushing and shoving, the thousands of smells and the voices filling the air.

‘Look around you, Meggie! Isn’t it wonderful?’ cried Fenoglio proudly.

It was indeed. It was just as Meggie had imagined it on all those evenings when Resa had told her about the Inkworld. Her senses were quite dazed. Eyes, ears ... they could scarcely take in a tenth of all that was going on around her. Music came from somewhere: trumpets, jingles, drums ... and then the street widened, spewing her and all the others out in front of the castle walls. They towered among the other buildings, tall and massive, as if they had been built by men larger than those now flocking to the gateway. Armed guards stood in front of the gate, with their helmets reflecting the pale morning light. Their cloaks were dark green, like the tunics they wore over their coats of mail. Both bore the emblem of the Laughing Prince. Resa had described it to Meggie: a lion on a green background, surrounded by white roses – but it had changed. The lion wept silver tears now, and the roses twined around a broken heart.

The guards let most of the crowd pass, only occasionally barring someone’s way with the shaft of a spear or a mailed fist. No one seemed troubled by that – they went on pressing in – and Meggie too finally found herself in the shadow of those metre-thick walls. Of course she had been in castles before, with Mo, but it felt quite different to be going in past guards armed with spears instead of a kiosk selling picture postcards. The walls seemed so much more threatening and forbidding. Look, they seemed to say, see how small you all are, how powerless and fragile.

Fenoglio appeared to feel none of this; he was beaming like a child at Christmas. He ignored both the portcullis above their heads and the slits through which hot pitch could be tipped out on the heads of uninvited guests. Meggie, on the contrary, instinctively looked up as they passed, and wondered why the traces of pitch on the weathered stone looked so fresh. But

finally the open sky was above her again, clear and blue, as if it had been swept clean for the princely birthday – and Meggie was in the Outer Courtyard of Ombra Castle.



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Visitors from the Wrong Side of the Forest

Darkness always had its part to play. Without it, how would we know when we walked in the light? It's only when its ambitions become too grandiose that it must be opposed, disciplined, sometimes – if necessary – brought down for a time. Then it will rise again, as it must.

Clive Barker,
Abarat

First of all Meggie looked for the birds' nests that Resa had described, and sure enough, there they were, clinging just below the battlements like blisters on the walls. Birds with yellow breasts shot out of the entrance holes. Like flakes of gold dancing in the sun, Resa had said, and she was right. The sky above Meggie seemed to be covered with swirling gold, all in honour of the princely birthday. More and more people surged through the gateway, although there was already a milling crowd in the courtyard. Stalls had been set up within the walls, in front of the stables and the huts where the blacksmiths, grooms and everyone else employed in the castle lived and worked. Today, as the Prince was inviting his subjects to celebrate with him the birthday of his grandson and royal heir,

food and drink was free. 'Very generous, I'm sure,' Mo would probably have whispered. 'Food and drink from their own fields, won by the labour of their own hands.' Mo did not particularly like castles. But that was the way of Fenoglio's world: the land on which the peasants toiled belonged to the Laughing Prince who was now the Prince of Sighs, so a large part of the harvest was his too, and he dressed in silk and velvet, while his peasants wore much-mended smocks that scratched the skin.

Despina had wound her thin arms around Fenoglio's neck when they passed the guards at the gate, but at the sight of the first entertainers she quickly slipped off his back. One of them had stretched his rope between the battlements, and was walking high up there in the air, moving more lightly than a spider on its silver thread. His clothes were blue as the sky above him, for blue was the colour of the tightrope-walkers; Meggie's mother had told her that too. If only Resa had been here! The Motley Folk were everywhere among the stalls: pipers and jugglers, knife-throwers, Strong Men, animal tamers, contortionists, actors, clowns. Right in front of the wall Meggie saw a fire-eater, yes, black and red was their costume, and for a moment she thought it was Dustfinger, but when the man turned he was a stranger with an unscarred face, and the smile with which he bowed to the people around him was not at all like Dustfinger's.

But he *must* be here, if he's really back, thought Meggie, as she looked around for him. Why did she feel so disappointed? As if she didn't know. It was Farid she really missed. And if Dustfinger wasn't here, she supposed it would be no use looking for Farid either.

'Come along, Meggie!' Despina pronounced her name as if it was going to take her tongue some time to get used to it. She pulled Meggie over to a stall selling sweet cakes dripping with honey. Even today those cakes had to be paid for. The trader selling them was keeping a close eye on his wares, but luckily

Fenoglio had a few coins on him. Despina's thin fingers were sticky when she put them into Meggie's hand again. She looked round, wide-eyed, and kept stopping, but Fenoglio impatiently waved them on, past a wooden platform decked with flowers and evergreen branches, rising above the stalls. The black banners flying from the castle battlements and towers overhead hung here as well, to the right and left of three thrones on the platform. The backs of the seats were embroidered with the emblem of the weeping lion.

'Why three thrones, I ask myself?' Fenoglio whispered to Meggie as he urged her and the children on. 'The Prince of Sighs himself won't be showing his face anyway. Come along, we're late already.' With a firm step, he turned his back on the busy scene in the Outer Courtyard and made his way to the Inner Ring of the castle walls. The gate towards which he was moving was not quite as tall as the one in the Outer Ring, but it too looked forbidding, and so did the guards who crossed their spears as Fenoglio approached them. 'As if they didn't know me!' he whispered crossly to Meggie. 'But we have to play the same game every time. Tell the Prince that Fenoglio the poet is here!' he said, raising his voice, as the two children pressed close to him and stared at the spears as if looking for dried blood on their points.

'Is the Prince expecting you?' The guard who spoke seemed to be still very young, judging by what could be seen of his face under his helmet.

'Of course he is!' snapped Fenoglio. 'And if he has to wait any longer I'll blame it on you, Anselmo. What's more, if you want me to write you a few fine-sounding words, as you did last month –' here the guard cast a nervous glance at his fellow sentry, but the latter pretended not to have heard and looked up at the tightrope-walker – 'then,' Fenoglio concluded, lowering his voice, 'I shall keep you waiting in your own turn. I'm an old man, and God knows I have better things to do than kick my heels here in front of your spear.'

All that could be seen of Anselmo's face turned as red as the sour wine that Fenoglio had drunk beside the strolling players' fire. However, he did not move his spear aside. 'The fact is, Inkweaver, we have visitors,' he said in an undertone.

'Visitors? What are you talking about?'

But Anselmo wasn't looking at Fenoglio any more.

The gate behind him opened, creaking, as if its own weight were too heavy for it. Meggie drew Despina aside; Fenoglio took Ivo's hand. Soldiers rode into the Outer Courtyard, armed horsemen, their cloaks silvery grey, like the greaves they wore on their legs, and the emblem on their breasts was not the Laughing Prince's. It showed a viper's slender body rearing up in search of prey, and Meggie recognized it at once. This was the Adderhead's coat of arms.

Nothing moved in the Outer Courtyard now. All was silent as the grave. The entertainers, even the blue-clad tightrope-walker high above on his rope, were all forgotten. Resa had told Meggie exactly what the Adderhead's emblem looked like; she had seen it often enough at close quarters. Envoys from the Castle of Night had been welcome guests in Capricorn's fortress. Many of the farms set on fire by Capricorn's men, so rumour said at the time, had been burned down on the Adderhead's orders.

Meggie held Despina close as the men-at-arms rode by them. Their breastplates glinted in the sun. It looked as if not even a bolt from a crossbow could pierce that armour, let alone a poor man's arrow. Two men rode at their head: one was a redhead, in armour like the soldiers following him but resplendent in a cloak of foxtails, while the other was wearing a green robe shot with silver that was fine enough for any prince. However, what everyone noticed about him first was not that robe but his nose; unlike ordinary noses of flesh and blood, it was made of silver.

'Look at that couple! What a team!' Fenoglio whispered to Meggie, as the two men rode side by side through the silent

crowd. 'Both of them my creations, and both once Capricorn's men. Your mother may have told you about them. Firefox was Capricorn's deputy, the Piper was his minstrel. But the silver nose wasn't my idea. Nor the fact that they escaped Cosimo's soldiers when he attacked Capricorn's fortress, and now serve the Adderhead.'

It was still eerily silent in the courtyard. There was no sound but the clatter of hooves, the snorting horses, the clank of armour, weapons and spears – curiously loud, as if the sounds were caught between the high walls like birds.

The Adderhead himself was one of the last to ride in. There was no mistaking him. 'He looks like a butcher,' Resa had said. 'A butcher in princely clothes, with his love of killing written all over his coarse face.' The horse he rode was white, heavily built like its master, and was almost entirely hidden by a caparison patterned with the snake emblem. The Adderhead himself wore a black robe embroidered with silver flowers. His skin was tanned by the sun, his sparse hair was grey, his mouth curiously small – a lipless slit in his coarse, clean-shaven face. Everything about him seemed heavy and fleshy: his arms and legs, his thick neck, his broad nose. Unlike those richer subjects of the Laughing Prince who were now standing in the courtyard, he wore no jewellery, no heavy chains around his neck, no rings set with precious stones on his fat fingers. But gems sparkled in the corners of his nostrils, red as drops of blood, and on the middle finger of his left hand, over his glove, he wore the silver ring he used for sealing death warrants. His eyes, narrow under lids folded like a salamander's, darted restlessly around the courtyard. They seemed to linger for a split second, like a lizard's sticky tongue, on everything they saw: the strolling players, the tightrope-walker overhead, the rich merchants waiting beside the empty, flower-decked platform, submissively bowing their heads when his glance rested on them. Nothing seemed to escape those salamander eyes, nothing at all: no child pressing his face into his mother's

apron in alarm, no beautiful woman, no man glaring up at him with hostility. Yet he reined in his horse in front of only one person in the crowd.

‘Well, well, so here’s the king of the strolling players! Last time I saw you, your head was in the pillory in my castle courtyard. And when are you going to honour us with another visit?’ The Adderhead’s voice rang out through the silent courtyard. It sounded very deep, as if it came from the black interior of his stout body. Meggie instinctively moved closer to Fenoglio’s side. But the Black Prince bowed, so deeply that the bow turned to mockery. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, loud enough for everyone to hear, ‘but I’m afraid my bear didn’t care for your hospitality. He says the pillory was rather tight for his neck.’

Meggie saw the Adderhead’s mouth twist into an unpleasant smile. ‘Well, I could keep a rope ready for your next visit – a rope that will fit perfectly, and a gallows of oak strong enough even for such a fat old bear as yours,’ he said.

The Black Prince turned to his bear and pretended to discuss it with him. ‘Sorry again,’ he said, as the bear threw its paws around his neck, grunting, ‘the bear says he likes the south, but your shadow lies too dark over it. He won’t come until the Bluejay pays you the honour of a visit too.’

A soft whisper ran through the crowd – and was silenced when the Adderhead turned in his saddle and let his lizard-like gaze move over those standing around him.

‘And furthermore,’ the Prince continued in a loud voice, ‘the bear would like to know why you don’t make the Piper trot along behind your horse on a silver chain, as such a good, tame minstrel should?’

The Piper wrenched his horse round, but before he could urge it towards the Black Prince the Adderhead raised a hand. ‘I will let you know just as soon as the Bluejay is my guest!’ he said, while the silver-nosed man reluctantly rode back to his place. ‘And believe me, that will be before long. I’ve already

ordered the gallows to be built.’ Then he spurred his horse, and the men-at-arms rode on again. It seemed an eternity before the last of them had disappeared through the gateway.

‘Yes, off you ride!’ whispered Fenoglio, as the castle courtyard gradually filled with carefree noise again. ‘Viewing this place as if it would all soon be his, thinking he can spread his power through my world like a running sore, and play a part I never wrote for him ...’

The guard’s spear abruptly silenced him. ‘Very well, poet!’ said Anselmo. ‘You can go in now. Off with you!’

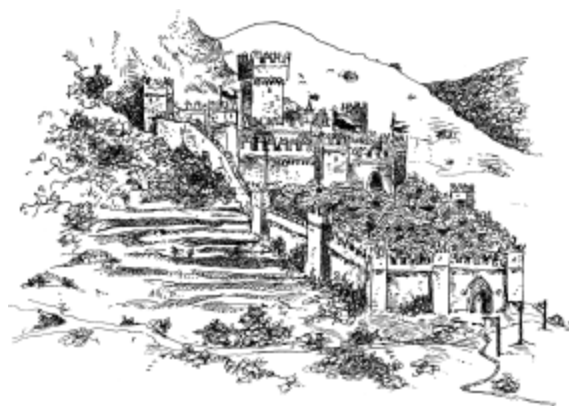
‘Off with you?’ thundered Fenoglio. ‘Is that any way to speak to the Prince’s poet? Listen,’ he told the two children, ‘you’d better stay here. Don’t eat too much cake. And don’t go too close to the fire-eater, because he’s useless at his job, and leave the Black Prince’s bear alone. Understand?’

The two of them nodded, and ran straight to the nearest cake stall. But Fenoglio took Meggie’s hand and strode past the guards with her, his head held high.

‘Fenoglio,’ she asked in a low voice as the gate closed behind them, and the noise of the Outer Courtyard died away, ‘who is the Bluejay?’

It was cool behind the great gate, as if winter had built itself a nest here. Trees shaded a wide courtyard, the air was fragrant with the scent of roses and other flowers whose names Meggie didn’t know, and a stone basin of water, round as the moon, reflected the part of the castle in which the Laughing Prince lived.

‘Oh, he doesn’t exist!’ was all Fenoglio would say, as he impatiently beckoned her on. ‘But I’ll explain all that later. Come along now. We must take the Laughing Prince my verses at last, or I won’t be his court poet any more.’



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The Prince of Sighs

The man couldn't very well tell the king, 'No, I won't go,' for he had to earn his bread.

Italo Calvino, tr. George Marten,
Italian Folk Tales,
'The King in the Basket'

The windows of the hall where the Prince of Sighs, once the Laughing Prince, received Fenoglio were hung with black draperies. The place smelled like a crypt, of dried flowers and soot from the candles. The candles were burning in front of statues which all had the same face, sometimes a good likeness, sometimes less good. Cosimo the Fair, thought Meggie. He stared down at her from countless pairs of marble eyes as she walked towards his father with Fenoglio.

The throne in which the Prince of Sighs sat enthroned stood between two other high-backed chairs. The dark green upholstery of the chair on his left was occupied only by a helmet with a plume of peacock feathers, its metal brightly polished as if it were waiting for its owner. A boy of about five or six sat in the chair on his right. He wore a black brocade doublet embroidered all over with pearls as if it were covered in tears. This must be the birthday boy: Jacopo, grandson of the Prince of Sighs, but the Adderhead's grandson too.

The child looked bored. He was swinging his short legs restlessly as if he could hardly prevent himself running outside to the entertainers, and the sweet cakes, and the armchair waiting for him on the platform adorned with prickly bindweed and roses. His grandfather, on the other hand, looked as if he never intended to rise from his chair again. He sat there as powerless as a puppet, in black robes that were too large for him now, as if hypnotized by the eyes of his dead son. Not particularly tall but fat enough for two men, that was how Resa had described him; seldom seen without something to eat in his greasy fingers, always rather breathless because of the weight his legs, which were not especially strong, had to carry, and yet always in the best of tempers.

The Prince whom Meggie saw now, sitting in his dimly lit castle, was nothing like that. His face was pale and his skin hung in wrinkled folds, as if it had once belonged to a larger man. Grief had melted the fat from his limbs, and his expression was fixed, as if it had frozen on the day when they brought him the news of his son's death. Only his eyes still showed his horror and bewilderment at what life had done to him.

Apart from his grandson and the guards standing silent in the background, there were only two women with him. One kept her head humbly bent like a maidservant, although she wore a dress fit for a princess. Her mistress stood between the Prince of Sighs and the empty chair on which the plumed helmet lay. Violante, thought Meggie. The Adderhead's daughter and Cosimo's widow. Her Ugliness, as people called her. Fenoglio had told Meggie about her, emphasizing the fact that she was indeed one of his creations, but that he had never intended her to be more than a minor character: the unhappy child of an unhappy mother and a very bad father. 'It's absurd to marry her to Cosimo the Fair!' Fenoglio had said. 'But as I told you, this story is getting out of hand!'

Violante wore black, like her son and her father-in-law. Her dress too was embroidered with pearly tears, but their precious

lustre didn't suit her particularly well. Her face looked as if someone had drawn it on a stained piece of paper with a pencil too pale for the purpose, and the dark silk of her dress made her look even plainer. The only thing you noticed about her face was the purple birthmark, as big as a poppy, disfiguring her left cheek.

When Meggie and Fenoglio came across the dark hall, Violante was just bending down to her father-in-law, speaking to him quietly. The Prince's expression did not change, but finally he nodded, and the boy slipped down from his chair in relief.

Fenoglio signalled to Meggie to stay where she was. His head respectfully bent, then he stepped aside, and unobtrusively signalled to Meggie to do the same. Violante nodded to Fenoglio as she passed him, her head held high, but she didn't even look at Meggie. She ignored the stone statues of her dead husband too. Her Ugliness seemed to be in a hurry to escape this dark hall – in almost as much of a hurry as her son. The maid who followed her passed so close to Meggie that the servant girl's dress almost touched her. She didn't seem much older than Meggie herself. Her hair had a reddish tinge, as if firelight were falling on it, and she wore it loose, as only the women among the strolling players usually did in this world. Meggie had never seen lovelier hair.

'You're late, Fenoglio!' said the Prince of Sighs as soon as the doors had closed behind the women and his grandson. His voice still came out of his mouth with an effort, like a very fat man's. 'Did you run short of words?'

'I won't run short of words until my last breath, my Prince,' replied Fenoglio, with a bow. Meggie wasn't sure whether to copy him. In the end she decided on a clumsy curtsy.

At close quarters the Prince of Sighs looked even more fragile. His skin resembled withered leaves; the whites of his eyes like yellowed paper. 'Who's the girl?' he asked, bending his

weary gaze on her. 'Your maid? Too young to be your lover, isn't she?'

Meggie felt the blood rise to her face.

'Your Grace, what an idea!' said Fenoglio, dismissing it and putting an arm around her shoulders. 'This is my granddaughter who's come to visit me. My son hopes I shall find her a husband, and what better place for her to look for one than at the wonderful festivities you're holding today?'

Meggie blushed more than ever, but she forced herself to smile.

'You have a son, do you?' The voice of the Prince of Sighs sounded envious, as if he begrudged any of his subjects the luck of having a living son. 'It's not wise to let your children go too far away,' he murmured, without taking his eyes off Meggie. 'Only too likely that they may never come back!'

Meggie didn't know where to look. 'I'll be going home soon,' she said. 'My father knows that.' I hope, she added in her mind.

'Yes. Yes, of course. She'll be going back. When the time comes.' Fenoglio's voice sounded impatient. 'But now we come to the reason for my visit.' He took the roll of parchment so carefully sealed by Rosenquartz from his belt, and climbed the steps to the princely chair with his head respectfully bent. The Prince of Sighs seemed to be in pain. He tightened his lips as he leaned forward to take the parchment, and cool though it was in the hall, sweat stood out on his forehead. Meggie remembered what Minerva had said: *This Prince of ours will sigh and lament himself to death.* Fenoglio seemed to think so too.

'Aren't you feeling well, my Prince?' he asked with concern.

'No, I am not!' snapped the Prince, annoyed. 'Unfortunately the Adderhead noticed it today too.' He leaned back, sighing, and struck the side of his chair with his hand. 'Tullio!'

A servant clad in black, like the Prince, shot out from behind the chair. He would have looked like a rather short human

being but for the fine fur on his face and hands. Tullio reminded Meggie of the brownies in Elinor's garden who had turned to ashes, although he clearly had more of the human being about him.

'Go and get me a minstrel – one who can read!' ordered the Prince. 'He can sing me Fenoglio's song.' And Tullio scurried off, as willing as a puppy.

'Did you send for Nettle, as I advised?' Fenoglio's voice sounded urgent, but the Prince just waved the idea angrily away.

'Nettle? What for? She wouldn't come, or if she did it would probably just be to poison me, because I had a couple of oaks felled for my son's coffin. How can I help it if she'd rather talk to trees than human beings? None of them can help me, not Nettle nor any of the physicians, stonecutters and boneknitters whose evil-smelling potions I've swallowed. No herb grows that can cure grief.' His fingers trembled as he broke Fenoglio's seal, and all was so still in the darkened hall as he read that Meggie heard the candle flames hiss as the wicks burned down.

Almost soundlessly, the Prince moved his lips as his clouded eyes followed Fenoglio's words. '*He will awake no more, oh never more,*' Meggie heard him whisper. She looked sideways at Fenoglio, who flushed guiltily when he noticed her glance. Yes, he had stolen the lines, and certainly not from any poet of this world.

The Laughing Prince raised his head and wiped a tear from his clouded eyes. 'Fair words, Fenoglio,' he said bitterly, 'yes, you know all about those. But when will any of you poets find the words to open the door through which Death takes us?'

Fenoglio looked round at the statues. He stared at them, lost in thought as if he were seeing them for the first time. 'I am sorry, but there are no such words, my Prince,' he said. 'Death is all silence. Even poets have no words once they have passed the door Death closes behind us. If I may, then, I would humbly

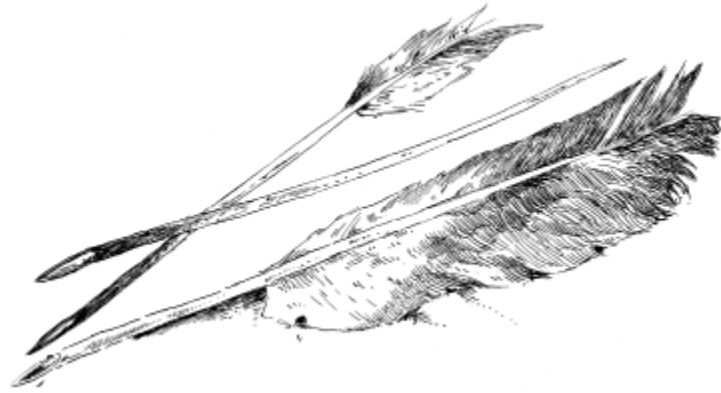
beg your leave to go. My landlady's children are waiting outside, and if I don't catch them again soon they may well run off with the strolling players, for like all children they dream of taming bears and dancing between heaven and hell on a tightrope.'

'Yes, yes, go away!' said the Prince of Sighs, wearily waving his beringed hand. 'I'll send to let you know when I want words again. They are sweet-tasting poison, but still, they're the only way to make even pain taste bittersweet for a few moments.'

He will awake no more, oh never more ... Elinor would certainly have known who wrote those lines, thought Meggie, as she walked back down the dark hall with Fenoglio. The herbs scattered on the floor rustled under her boots. Their fragrance hung in the cool air as if to remind the sad Prince of the world waiting for him out there. But perhaps it reminded him only of the flowers in the crypt where Cosimo lay.

At the door, Tullio came to meet them with the minstrel, hopping and leaping in front of the man like a trained, shaggy animal. The minstrel wore bells at his waist and had a lute on his back. He was a tall, thin fellow with a sullen set to his mouth, and so garishly clothed that he would have put a peacock's tail to shame.

'That fellow can actually read, can he?' Fenoglio whispered to Meggie as he pushed her through the door. 'I don't believe it! What's more, his singing sounds as sweet as the cawing of a crow. Let's be off before he gets his great horsy teeth into my poor lines of verse!'



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22

Ten Years

**Time is a horse that runs in the heart, a horse
Without a rider on a road at night.
The mind sits listening and hears it pass.**

**Wallace Stephens,
'The Pure Good of Theory',
*Collected Poems***

Dustfinger was leaning against the castle wall, behind the stalls where people were crowding. The aroma of honey and hot chestnuts rose to his nostrils, and high above him went the tightrope-walker whose blue figure, from a distance, reminded him so much of Cloud-Dancer. He was holding a long pole with tiny birds sitting on it, birds as red as drops of blood, and when the dancer changed direction – stepping lightly, as if standing on a swaying rope was the most natural thing in the world – the birds flew up and fluttered around him, twittering shrilly. The marten on Dustfinger's shoulder looked up at them and licked his lips. He was still very young, smaller and more delicate than Gwin, not half as likely to bite, and most important of all he didn't fear fire. Absently, Dustfinger tickled his horned head. He had caught him behind the stable soon after his arrival at Roxane's house, when the marten was trying to stalk her chickens, and had called him Jink, because of the way he jinked as he moved, dodging and darting before

jumping up at Dustfinger so suddenly that he almost knocked him over. Are you crazy? he had asked himself when he lured the animal to him with a fresh egg. He's a marten. How do you know that it makes any difference to Death what name he bears? But he'd kept Jink all the same. Perhaps he had left all his fears behind in the other world: his fears, his loneliness, his ill fortune ...

Jink learned fast; he was soon leaping through the flames as if he'd been doing it all his life. It would be easy to earn a few coins with him at the markets – with him and the boy.

The marten nuzzled Dustfinger's cheek. Some acrobats were building a human tower in front of the empty platform that still awaited the birthday boy. Farid had tried persuading Dustfinger to perform too, but he didn't want people staring at him today. He wanted to stare himself, see his fill of all he'd missed so long. So he was not in fire-eater's costume either, but wore Roxane's dead husband's clothes, which she had given him. They had obviously been almost the same size. Poor fellow: neither Orpheus nor Silvertongue could bring him back from where he was now.

'Why don't *you* earn the money today for a change?' he had asked Farid. The boy had turned first red and then white as chalk with pride – and shot away into the turmoil. He was a quick learner. Only a tiny morsel of the fiery honey, and Farid was talking to the flames as if he'd been born with their language on his tongue. Of course, they didn't yet spring from the ground when the boy snapped his fingers as readily as for Dustfinger himself, but when Farid called to the fire in a low voice it would speak to him – condescendingly, sometimes with mockery, but still it answered him.

'Oh, but he *is* your son!' Roxane had said when Farid had drawn a bucket of water from the well early in the morning, cursing, to cool his burned fingers. 'He's not,' Dustfinger had replied – and had seen in her eyes that she didn't believe him.

Before they set off for the castle, he had practised a couple of tricks with Farid, and Jehan had watched. But when Dustfinger beckoned him closer, he ran away. Farid had laughed out loud at him for it, but Dustfinger put his hand over his mouth. 'The fire devoured his father, have you forgotten?' he had whispered, and Farid bowed his head, ashamed.

How proudly he stood there among the other entertainers! Dustfinger pushed his own way past the stalls to get a better view. Farid had taken off his shirt as Dustfinger himself sometimes did – burning cloth was more dangerous than a small burn on the skin, and you could easily protect your naked body against the licking tongues of fire with grease. The boy put on a good act, such a good one that even the traders stared at him spellbound, and Dustfinger took his chance to free a few fairies from the cages where they had been imprisoned, to be sold to some fool as lucky charms. No wonder Roxane suspects you of being his father, he told himself. Your chest swells with pride when you look at him. Next to Farid, a couple of clowns were exchanging broad jokes, to his right the Black Prince was wrestling with his bear, but all the same more and more people stopped to look at the boy standing there playing with fire, oblivious of all around him. Dustfinger watched as Sootbird lowered his torches and looked enviously their way. He'd never learn. He was still as poor a fire-eater as he'd been ten years ago.

Farid bowed, and a shower of coins fell into the wooden bowl that Roxane had given him. He glanced proudly at Dustfinger, as hungry for praise as a dog for a bone, and when Dustfinger clapped his hands he flushed red with delight. What a child he still was, even though he had proudly shown Dustfinger the first stubble on his chin a few months ago!

Dustfinger was making his way past two farmers haggling over a couple of piglets when the gate to the Inner Castle opened again – this time not, as before, for the Adderhead, when Dustfinger himself had only just managed to hide from

the Piper's searching glance behind a cake stall. No. Obviously the birthday boy himself was finally appearing at his own festivities – and his mother would accompany the child, with her maidservant. How fast his foolish heart was suddenly beating! 'She has your hair,' Roxane had said, 'and my eyes.'

The Prince's pipers made the most of their big scene. Proud as turkey-cocks they stood there, long-stemmed trumpets held aloft in the air. The strolling players, being their own masters, disapproved without exception of musicians who sold their art to a single lord. In exchange, the pipers were better dressed, not in motley array like the players on the road, but in their Prince's colours. For the pipers of the Prince of Sighs, that meant green and gold. His daughter-in-law wore black. Cosimo the Fair had been dead for barely a year, but his young widow would certainly have been courted by several suitors already, in spite of the mark, dark as a burn, that disfigured her face. The crowd came thronging around the platform as soon as Violante and her son had taken their seats. Dustfinger had to climb on an empty barrel to catch a glimpse of her maidservant beyond all those heads and bodies.

Brianna was standing behind the boy. Despite her bright hair, she was like her mother. The dress she wore made her look very grown up, yet Dustfinger still saw in her face traces of the little girl who had tried to snatch burning torches from his hand, or stamped her foot angrily when he wouldn't let her catch the sparks he brought raining down from the sky.

Ten years. Ten years he'd spent in the wrong story. Ten years in which Death had taken one of his daughters, leaving behind nothing but memories as pale and indistinct as if she had never lived at all, while his other daughter had grown up, laughing and weeping through all those years, and he had not been there. Hypocrite! he told himself, unable to take his eyes from Brianna's face. Are you trying to tell yourself you were a devoted father before Silvertongue lured you into his story?

Cosimo's son laughed out loud. His stubby finger pointed first at one, then at another of the entertainers, and he caught the flowers that the women players threw him. How old was he? Five? Six?

Brianna had been the same age when Silvertongue's voice had enticed him away. She had only come up to his elbow, and she'd weighed so little that he scarcely noticed when she climbed up on his back. When he forgot time yet again and stayed away for weeks on end, in places with names she had never heard, she used to hit him with her little fists and throw the presents he brought her at his feet. Then she would slip out of bed the same night to retrieve them after all: coloured ribbons as soft as rabbit fur, fabric flowers to put in her hair, little pipes that could imitate the song of a lark or the hoot of an owl. She had never told him so, of course, she was proud – even prouder than her mother – but he always knew where she put the presents – in a bag among her clothes. Did she still have it?

She had kept his presents, yes, but they could never bring a smile to her face when he had stayed away for a long time. Only fire could do that, and for a moment – a seductive moment – Dustfinger was tempted to step out of the gaping crowd, take his place among the other entertainers performing tricks for the Prince's grandson, and summon fire just for his daughter's sake. But he stood where he was, invisible behind the throng, watching her smooth back her hair with the palm of her hand in the same way as her mother did so often, unobtrusively rubbing her nose and shifting from foot to foot, as if she'd much rather be dancing down there than standing stiffly here.

'Eat him, bear! Eat him up this minute! So he really is back, but do you think he's planning to go and see an old friend?'

Dustfinger spun round so suddenly that he almost fell off the barrel where he was still standing. The Black Prince was looking up at him, with his bear behind him. Dustfinger had

hoped to meet him here, surrounded by strangers, rather than in the strolling players' camp, where there were too many who would ask where he had been ... The two of them had known each other since they were the same age as the Prince's grandson enthroned in his chair on the platform – the orphaned sons of strolling players, adult before their time, and Dustfinger had missed that face almost as much as Roxane's.

'So will he really eat me if I get off this barrel?' The Prince laughed. His laughter sounded almost as carefree as in the old days. 'Maybe. After all, he's noticed that I really do have a grudge against you for not coming to see me. And didn't you scorch his fur last time you two met?'

Jink crouched on Dustfinger's shoulder as he jumped off the barrel, chattering excitedly in his ear. 'Don't worry, the bear doesn't eat your sort!' Dustfinger whispered to him – and hugged the Prince as hard as if a single embrace could make up for ten years.

'You still smell more of bear than man.'

'And you smell of fire. Now tell me, where've you been?' The Black Prince held Dustfinger at arm's length and looked at him as if he could read in his face everything that had happened during his friend's absence. 'So the fire-raisers didn't string you up, then, as many folk say. You look too healthy for that. What about the other story – that the Adderhead locked you up in his dankest dungeon? Or did you turn yourself into a tree for a while, as some songs say, a tree with burning leaves deep in the Wayless Wood?'

Dustfinger smiled. 'I'd have liked that. But I assure you, even you wouldn't believe the real story.'

A whisper ran through the crowd. Looking over all the heads, Dustfinger saw Farid, red in the face, acknowledging their applause. Her Ugliness's son was clapping so hard that he almost fell off his chair. But Farid was searching the throng for

Dustfinger's face. He smiled at the boy – and sensed that the Black Prince was looking at him thoughtfully.

‘So the boy really is yours?’ he said. ‘No, don’t worry, I’ll ask no more questions. I know you like to have your secrets, and I don’t suppose that has changed much. All the same, I want to hear the story you spoke of, some time. And you owe us a performance too. We can all do with something to cheer us up. Times are bad, even on this side of the forest, though it may not seem so today ...’

‘Yes, so I’ve heard already. And the Adderhead obviously doesn’t love you any better than before. What have you done, to make him threaten you with the gallows? Did the bear take one of his stags?’ Dustfinger stroked Jink’s bristling fur. The marten never took his eyes off the bear.

‘Oh, believe me, the Adderhead scarcely guesses half of what I do, or I’d have been dangling from the battlements of the Castle of Night long ago!’

‘Oh yes?’ The tightrope-walker was sitting on his rope above them, surrounded by his birds and swinging his legs, as if the milling crowd down below was nothing to do with him. ‘Prince, I don’t like that look in your eye,’ said Dustfinger, looking up at the man walking the rope. ‘You’d do better not to provoke the Adderhead any more, or he’ll have you hunted down just as he’s hunted others. And then you won’t be safe on this side of the forest either!’

Someone was pulling at his sleeve. Dustfinger turned, so abruptly that Farid flinched back in alarm. ‘I’m sorry!’ he stammered, nodding rather uncertainly to the Prince. ‘But Meggie’s here. With Fenoglio!’ He sounded as excited as if he had met the Laughing Prince in person.

‘Where?’ Dustfinger looked round, but Farid had eyes only for the bear, who had affectionately placed his muzzle on the Black Prince’s head. The Prince smiled and pushed the bear’s muzzle away.

‘Where?’ Dustfinger repeated impatiently. For Fenoglio was the very last person he wanted to meet.

‘Over there, just behind the platform!’

Dustfinger looked the way Farid’s finger was pointing. Sure enough, there was the old man, with two children, just as he had first seen him. Silvertongue’s daughter stood beside him. She had grown tall – and even more like her mother. Dustfinger uttered a quiet curse. What were those two after, here in *his* story? They had as little to do with it as he had to do with theirs. Oh yes? mocked a voice inside him. The old man won’t see it that way. Did you forget he claims to have created everything here?

‘I don’t want to see him,’ he told Farid. ‘Bad luck clings to that old man, and worse than bad luck too, mark my words.’

‘Is the boy talking about the Inkweaver?’ The Prince came so close to Dustfinger’s side that the marten hissed at him. ‘What do you have against him? He writes good songs.’

‘He writes other things as well.’ And who knows what he’s already written about you, Dustfinger added in his mind. A few well-chosen words, Prince, and you’re a dead man!

Farid was still looking at the girl. ‘What about Meggie? Don’t you want to see her either?’ His voice sounded husky with disappointment. ‘She asked how you were.’

‘Give her my regards. She’ll understand. Off you go, then! I can see you’re still in love with her. How was it you once described her eyes? Little pieces of the sky!’

Farid blushed scarlet. ‘Stop it!’ he said angrily.

But Dustfinger took him by the shoulders and turned him round. ‘Go on!’ he said. ‘Give her my regards, but tell her to keep my name out of her magic mouth, understand?’

Farid cast a last glance at the bear, nodded – and strolled back to the girl very slowly, as if to show that he wasn’t in any hurry to reach her. She was going to great pains herself not to

look his way too often, as she fidgeted awkwardly with the sleeves of her dress. She looked as if she belonged here, a maidservant from a not particularly prosperous home, perhaps the daughter of a farmer or a craftsman. Well, her father was indeed a craftsman, wasn't he? If one with special talents. Perhaps she was looking around rather too freely. Girls here usually kept their heads bent – and sometimes they were already married by her age. Did his daughter Brianna have anything like that in mind? Roxane hadn't said so.

'That boy's good. Better than Sootbird already.' The Prince put out his hand to the marten – and withdrew it when Jink bared his tiny teeth.

'That's not difficult.' Dustfinger let his eyes wander to Fenoglio. So they called him Inkweaver here. How contented he looked, the man who had written Dustfinger's death. A knife in the back, plunged so deep that it found his heart, that was what Fenoglio had planned for him. Dustfinger instinctively reached to touch the spot between his shoulder-blades. Yes; he had read them already, after all, Fenoglio's deadly words, one night in the other world when he had been lying awake, trying in vain to conjure up Roxane's face in his memory. *You can't go back!* He had kept hearing Meggie's voice saying those words. *One of Capricorn's men is waiting for you in the book. They want to kill Gwin, and you try to help him, so they kill you instead.* He had taken the book out of his rucksack with trembling fingers, had opened it and searched the pages for his death. And then he'd read what it said there in black and white, over and over again. After that he had decided to leave Gwin behind if he should ever come back here ... Dustfinger stroked Jink's bushy tail. No, perhaps it had not been a good idea to catch another marten.

'What's the matter? You look as if the hangman had given you the nod all of a sudden.' The Black Prince put an arm around his shoulders, while his bear sniffed curiously at Dustfinger's rucksack. 'The boy must have told you how we picked him up in the forest? He was in a state of great

agitation, said he was here to warn you. And when he said of whom, many of my men's hands went to their knives.'

Basta. Dustfinger ran a finger over his scarred cheek. 'Yes, he's probably back too.'

'With his master?'

'No, Capricorn's dead. I saw him die myself.'

The Black Prince put his hand in his bear's mouth and tickled its tongue. 'Well, that's good news. And there wouldn't be much for him to come back to, just a few charred walls. Only old Nettle sometimes goes there. She swears you can't find better yarrow anywhere than in the fire-raisers' old fortress.'

Dustfinger saw Fenoglio glancing his way. Meggie was looking in the same direction too. He quickly turned his back on them.

'We have a camp near there now – you'll remember the old brownies' caves,' the Prince went on, lowering his voice. 'Since Cosimo smoked out the fire-raisers those caves have made a good shelter again. Only the strolling players know about them. The old and frail, cripples, women tired of living on the road with their children – they can all stay and rest there for a while. I tell you what, the Secret Camp would be a good place for you to tell me your story! The one you say is so hard to believe. I've often been there for the bear's sake. He gets grouchy when he spends too long between city walls. Roxane can tell you how to find the place; she knows her way about the forest almost as well as you by now.'

'I know the old brownie caves,' said Dustfinger. He had hidden from Capricorn's men there many times, but he wasn't sure that he really wanted to tell the Prince about the last ten years.

'Six torches!' Farid was beside him again, wiping soot off his fingers on his trousers. 'I juggled with six torches and I didn't drop one. I think she liked it.'

Dustfinger suppressed a smile. 'Very likely.' Two of the strolling players had drawn the Prince aside. Dustfinger wasn't sure whether he knew them, but he turned his back, to be on the safe side.

'Did you know everyone's talking about you?' Farid's eyes were round as coins with excitement. 'They're all saying you're back. And I think some of them have recognized you.'

'Oh, have they?' Dustfinger looked uneasily around. His daughter was still standing behind the little prince's chair. He hadn't told Farid about her. It was bad enough having the boy jealous of Roxane.

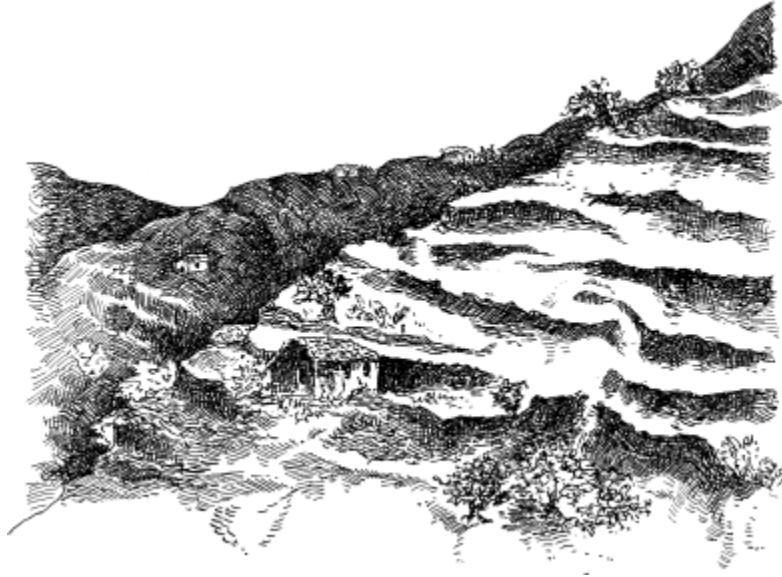
'They say there was never a fire-eater to match you! The other one there, Sootbird they call him –' Farid put a piece of bread in Jink's mouth – 'he asked about you, but I didn't know if you wanted to meet him. He's really bad at it, he doesn't know how to do anything – but he says he knows you. Is that right?'

'Yes, but all the same I'd rather not meet him.' Dustfinger turned. The tightrope-walker had come down from his rope at last. Cloud-Dancer was talking to him and pointing Dustfinger's way. Time to disappear. He would be happy to see them all again, but not here, and not today ...

'I've had enough of this,' he told Farid. 'You stay and earn us a few more coins. I'll be at Roxane's if you want me.'

Up on the platform, Her Ugliness was handing her son a gold-embroidered purse. The child put his plump hand into it and threw the entertainers some coins. They hastily bent to pick them out of the dust. But Dustfinger cast a last look at the Black Prince and went away.

What would Roxane say when she heard that he hadn't exchanged a single word with his daughter? He knew the answer. She would laugh. She knew only too well what a coward he could be.



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Cold and White

I am like a goldsmith hammering day and night
 Just so I can extend pain
 Into a gold ornament as thin as a cicada's wing

Xi Murong,
 'Poetry's Value',
Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry

There they were again. Mo felt them coming closer, he saw them even though his eyes were closed – white women, their faces so pale, their eyes colourless and cold. That was all there was in the world, white shadows in the dark and the pain in his breast, red pain. Every breath brought it back. Breathing. Hadn't it once been perfectly easy? Now it was difficult, as difficult as if they had buried him already, heaping earth on his breast, on the pain burning and throbbing there. He couldn't move. His body was useless, a burning prison. He wanted to open his eyes, but his lids weighed down as heavily as if they were made of stone. Everything was lost. Only words remained: pain, fear, death. White words. No colour in them, no life. Only the pain was red.

Is this death? Mo wondered. This void, full of faint shadows? Sometimes he thought he felt the fingers of the pale women reaching into his agonized breast as if to crush his heart. Their

breath wafted over his hot face, and they were whispering a name, but it was not the name he remembered as his own. Bluejay, they whispered.

Their voices seemed to be made of cold yearning, nothing but cold yearning. It's easy, they whispered, you don't even have to open your eyes. No more pain, no darkness. Stand up, they whispered, it's time to go, and they entwined their white fingers with his. Their fingers were wonderfully cool on his burning skin.

But the other voice wouldn't let him go. Indistinct, barely audible, as if it came from far, far away, it penetrated the whispering. It sounded strange, almost discordant among the whispering shadows. Be quiet, he wanted to tell it with his tongue of stone. Be quiet, please, let me go! For nothing but that voice kept him imprisoned in the burning house that was his body. But the voice went on.

He knew it, but where from? He couldn't remember. It was long ago that he had last heard it, too long ago ...



In Elinor's Cellar

The lofty bookshelves sag
Under thousands of sleeping souls
Silence, hopeful –
Every time I open a book, a soul is awakened.

Xi Chuan,
'Books',
New Generation

I thought to have furnished my cellar more comfortably, thought Elinor, watching Darius pump up the air mattress he had found behind one of the storage shelves for her. But how could she have guessed that some dreadful day she'd have to sleep down here, while a bespectacled, moon-faced man sat up in her wonderful library with his slobbering dog, playing master of the house? The wretched animal had almost eaten the fairy who had slipped out of Orpheus's words. A blue fairy and a lark fluttering in panic against the window-panes, that was all that had come out of the book – to replace four people! 'Look at that!' Orpheus had triumphantly announced. 'Two for four! There are fewer and fewer coming out, and one day I'll manage not to let anything out of a book at all.' Conceited pig! As if anyone was interested in who or what came out of the book, when Resa and Mortimer had gone! And Mortola and Basta ...

Quick, Elinor, think of something else!

If only she could have hoped that someone useful would soon come knocking on her front door! But unfortunately such a visitor was highly improbable. She had never had much to do with her neighbours, certainly not since Darius had taken over the care of her books and Mo, Resa and Meggie had moved in. What more did she need in the way of company?

Her nose began to prickle ominously. That's the wrong way to think, Elinor, she warned herself – as if she'd been able to think of anything else these last few hours. They're all right! she kept telling herself. You'd have sensed it if anything had happened to them. Wasn't that what all the stories said? You felt it, like a pang in your heart, when something happened to someone you loved?

Darius smiled hesitantly at her as his foot went tirelessly up and down on the pump. The air mattress already looked like a caterpillar, a huge, squashed caterpillar. How was she supposed to sleep on that thing? She'd roll off and land on the cold cement floor.

'Darius!' she said. 'We must do something! We can't simply let them shut us up here while Mortola ...'

Oh God, how that old witch had looked at Mortimer. Don't think about it, Elinor! Just don't think about it! Or about Basta and his gun. Or Meggie wandering through the Wayless Wood all alone. I'm sure she's alone! A giant will have stepped on that boy and crushed him by now ... It was a good thing Darius didn't know the silly way her thoughts were getting all mixed up, making the tears start to come all the time ...

'Darius!' Elinor whispered, for the man built like a wardrobe would certainly be on guard outside the door. 'Darius, it's all up to you! You must read them back!'

Darius shook his head so vigorously that his glasses almost slipped off his nose. 'No!' His voice was trembling like a leaf in the wind, and his foot began pumping again as if that stupid

mattress were the most important thing in the world. Then, very suddenly, he stopped and hid his face in his hands. 'You know what will happen!' Elinor heard him say in a stifled voice. 'You know what will happen to them if I read while I'm afraid.'

Elinor sighed.

Yes, she knew. Distorted faces, stiff legs, a lost voice ... and of course he was afraid. Probably even more afraid than she was, for Darius had known Mortola and Basta considerably longer ...

'Yes. Yes, I know. All right,' she murmured, and began abstractedly straightening a few cans on the shelves – tomato sauce, ravioli (not a particularly nice brand), red kidney beans – Mortimer loved red kidney beans. There it came again, that prickling in her nose.

'Very well!' she said, turning round resolutely. 'Then that Orpheus will have to do it.' How composed and sure of herself she sounded! She was obviously a gifted actress, thought Elinor, she'd realized that before, back in Capricorn's church when all had seemed lost ... indeed, now that she came to think of it, everything had seemed rather gloomier then, if anything.

Darius stared at her, bewildered.

'Don't look at me like that, for God's sake!' she hissed. 'I don't know how we can make him do it either. Not yet.'

She began pacing up and down, up and down, between the shelves full of cans and preserving jars.

'He's vain, Darius!' she whispered. 'Very vain. Did you see how he changed colour when he realized that Meggie had done something he's tried and failed to do for years? I'm sure he'd like to ask her—' She stopped suddenly and looked at Darius.

'—how she managed it.' Darius stopped pumping.

'Yes! But Meggie would have to be here herself to tell him that.' They looked at each other.

‘That’s how we’ll do it, Darius!’ Elinor whispered. ‘We’ll get Orpheus to bring Meggie back, and then she can read Mortimer and Resa back too, with the same words he used for her! That ought to work!’ She began pacing up and down again like the caged panther in the poem she liked so much ... except that the look in her eyes was no longer hopeless. She must lay her plans well. That man Orpheus was clever. And so are you, Elinor, she told herself. Just try it!

She couldn’t help it; she started thinking of the way Mortola had looked at Mortimer again. Suppose it was much too late by the time she ...?

Oh, stop it!

Elinor thrust out her chin, pulled her shoulders back – and marched firmly towards the cellar door. She hammered on the white-painted metal with the flat of her hand. ‘Hey!’ she called. ‘Hey, you, wardrobe-man! Open this door! I have to speak to that man Orpheus! At once.’

But nothing stirred on the other side of the door – and Elinor let her hand drop again. For a moment she entertained the dreadful thought that the two men had gone and left them alone down here, locked in ... and without so much as a can opener, thought Elinor. What a ridiculous way to die. Starving among piles of canned food. She was just raising both hands to hammer on the door again when she heard footsteps outside. Footsteps going away, up the stairs leading from the cellar to the entrance hall.

‘Hey!’ she shouted, so loudly that Darius, standing behind her, jumped. ‘Hey, come back, you hulking great wardrobe! Open this door! I want to talk to Orpheus!’

But all was quiet on the other side of the door. Elinor fell to her knees in front of it. She felt Darius come up beside her and put a hand hesitantly on her shoulder. ‘He’ll be back,’ he said quietly. ‘At least they’re still here, aren’t they?’ Then he returned to the air mattress.

But Elinor sat there, her back against the cold cellar door, listening to the silence. You couldn't even hear the birds down here, not the smallest chirp of a cricket. Meggie will fetch them back, she thought. Meggie will fetch them back! But suppose by now her mother and father are both ...

Not the way to think, Elinor. Not the way to think.

She closed her eyes and heard Darius begin pumping again.

I'd have sensed it, she thought. Yes, I would. I'd have sensed it if anything had happened to them. It says so in all the stories, and surely they can't *all* be lying!



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The Camp in the Forest

I thought it said in every tick:
I am so sick, so sick, so sick;
O death, come quick, come quick, come quick.

Frances Cornford,
'The Watch',
Collected Poems

Resa didn't know how long she had been sitting there, just sitting in the dimly lit, dark cave where the strolling players slept, holding Mo's hand. One of the women players brought her something to eat, and now and then one of the children crept in, leaned against the cave wall and listened to what she was telling Mo in a quiet voice – about Meggie and Elinor, Darius, the library and its books, the workshop where he cured books of sickness and wounds as bad as his own ... How strange the strolling players must find her stories of another world that they had never seen. And how very strange they must think her, to talk to someone who lay so still, his eyes closed as if he would never open them again.

Just as the fifth White Woman appeared on the steps, the old woman had returned to Capricorn's fortress with three men. It had not been so very far for her to go. Resa had seen guards standing among the trees as they entered the camp. The people

these men were guarding were the cripples and the old folk, women with small children, and obviously there were also some in the camp who were simply resting from the stress and strain of life on the open road.

When Resa asked where food and clothing for all these people came from, one of the strolling players who had come to fetch Mo replied: 'From the Prince.' And when she asked what prince he meant, he had put a black stone into her hand by way of answer.

She was known as Nettle, the old woman who had so suddenly appeared at the gate of Capricorn's fortress. Everyone treated her with respect, but a little fear was mingled with it too. Resa had to help her when she cauterized Mo's wound. She still felt sick when she thought of it. Then she had helped the old woman to bind up the wound again, and memorized all her directions. 'If he's still breathing in three days' time he may live,' she had said before leaving them alone again, in the cave that offered protection from wild beasts, the sun and the rain, but not from fear or from black, despairing thoughts.

Three days. It grew dark and then light again outside, light and then dark again, and every time Nettle came back and bent over Mo, Resa sought her face desperately for some sign of hope. But the old woman's features remained expressionless. The days went by, and Mo was still breathing, but he still wouldn't open his eyes.

The cave smelled of mushrooms, the brownies' favourite food. Very likely a whole pack of them had once lived here. Now the mushroom aroma mingled with the scent of dead leaves. The strolling players had strewn the cold floor of the cave with them: dead leaves and fragrant herbs – thyme, meadowsweet, woodruff. Resa rubbed the dry leaves between her fingers as she sat there cooling Mo's forehead, which was not cold any more but hot, terribly hot ... the scent of thyme reminded her of a fairy tale he had read to her long, long ago, before he found out that his voice could bring someone like

Capricorn out of the words on the page. *Wild thyme should not be brought indoors*, the story had said, *bad luck comes with it*. Resa threw the hard stems away and brushed the scent off her fingers on to her dress.

One of the women brought her something to eat again, and sat beside her for a while in silence, as if hoping that her presence would bring a little comfort. Soon after that three of the men came in too, but they stayed standing at the entrance of the cave, looking at her and Mo from a distance. They whispered to each other as they glanced at the pair of them.

‘Are we welcome here?’ Resa asked Nettle on one of her silent visits. ‘I think they’re talking about us.’

‘Let them!’ was all the old woman said. ‘I told them you were attacked by footpads, but of course that doesn’t satisfy them. A beautiful woman, a man with a strange wound, where do they come from? What happened? They’re curious. And if you’re wise, you won’t let too many of them see that scar on his arm.’

‘Why not?’ Resa looked at her, baffled.

The old woman scrutinized her as if she wanted to see into her heart. ‘Well, if you really don’t know, then that’s just as well,’ she said at last. ‘And let them talk. What else are they to do? Some come here to wait for death, others for life to begin at last, others again live only on the stories they are told. Tightrope-walkers, fire-eaters, peasants, princes – they’re all the same, flesh and blood and a heart that knows it will stop beating one day.’

Fire-eaters. Resa’s heart leaped when Nettle mentioned them. Of course. Why hadn’t she thought of it before?

‘Please!’ she said, when the old woman reached the entrance of the cave again. ‘You must know many strolling players. Is there one who calls himself Dustfinger?’

Nettle turned as slowly as if she were still deciding whether to answer this. ‘Dustfinger?’ she finally replied, in unforthcoming tones. ‘You’ll scarcely find one of the strolling

players who doesn't know of him, but no one's seen him for years. Although there are rumours that he's back ...'

Oh yes, he's back, thought Resa, and he will help me just as I helped him in the other world.

'I must send him a message!' She heard the desperation in her own voice. 'Please!'

Nettle looked at her without any expression on her brown face. 'Cloud-Dancer is here,' she said at last. 'His leg is aching again, but as soon as it's better he'll be on his way. See if he'll ask around for you and deliver your message.'

Then she had gone.

Cloud-Dancer.

Darkness was falling again outside, and with the fading light men, women and children came into the cave and lay down on the dead leaves to sleep – away from her, as if Mo's stillness might be catching. One of the women brought her a torch. It cast quivering shadows on the rocky walls, shadows that made faces and passed black fingers over Mo's pallid face. The fire did not keep the White Women away, although it was said that they both desired and feared it. They appeared in the cave again and again, like pale reflections with faces made of mist. They came closer and disappeared again, presumably driven away by the sharp and bitter smell of the leaves that Nettle had scattered around the place where Mo was lying. 'It will keep them off,' the old woman had said, 'but you must watch carefully all the same.'

One of the children was crying in his sleep. His mother stroked his hair to comfort him, and Resa couldn't help thinking of Meggie. Was she alone, or was the boy still with her? Was she happy, sad, sick, in good health ...? How often she had asked herself these questions, as if she hoped for an answer some time, from somewhere ...

A woman brought her fresh water. She smiled gratefully, and asked the woman about Cloud-Dancer. 'He prefers to sleep in

the open,' she said, pointing. It was some time since Resa had seen any more White Women, but all the same she woke one of the women who had offered to relieve her during the night. Then she climbed over the sleeping figures and went out.

The moon was shining through the dense canopy of leaves, brighter than any torch. A few men were sitting around a fire. Unsure of herself, Resa went towards them, in the dress that wasn't right for this place at all. It ended too far above her ankles even for one of the strolling players, and it was torn too.

The men stared at her, both suspicious and curious.

'Is one of you Cloud-Dancer?'

A thin little man, toothless and probably not nearly as old as he looked, nudged the man sitting next to him in the ribs.

'Why do you ask?' This man's face was friendly, but his eyes were wary.

'Nettle says he might carry a message for me.'

'A message? Who to?' He stretched his left leg, rubbing the knee as if it hurt him.

'To a fire-eater. Dustfinger is his name. His face ...'

Cloud-Dancer drew one finger over his cheek. 'Three scars. I know. What do you want with him?'

'I want you to take him this.' Resa knelt down by the fire and put her hand into the pocket of her dress. She always had paper and a pencil with her; they had done duty as her tongue for years. Now her voice was back, but a wooden tongue was more useful for sending Dustfinger a message. Fingers trembling, she began to write, taking no notice of the suspicious eyes following her hand as if she were doing something forbidden.

'She can write,' remarked the toothless man. There was no mistaking the disapproval in his tone. It was a long, long time ago that Resa had sat in the market places of towns on the far side of the forest, dressed in men's clothes and with her hair cut short, because writing was the only way she knew to earn her

living – and writing was a craft forbidden to women in this world. Slavery was the punishment for it, and it had made her Mortola's slave. For it was Mortola who had discovered Resa's disguise, and as a reward she was allowed to take her away to Capricorn's fortress.

'Dustfinger won't be able to read that,' pointed out Cloud-Dancer equably.

'Yes, he will. I taught him how.'

They looked at her incredulously. Letters. Mysterious things, rich men's tools, not meant for strolling players and certainly not for women ...

Only Cloud-Dancer smiled. 'Well, fancy that. Dustfinger can read,' he said softly. 'Fine, but I can't. You'd better tell me what you've written, so that I can tell him the words even if your note gets lost. Which can easily happen with written words, much more easily than with words in your head.'

Resa looked Cloud-Dancer straight in the face. *You trust people far too easily ...* how often Dustfinger had told her that, but what choice did she have now? In a low voice, she repeated what she had written. *'Dear Dustfinger, I am in the strolling players' camp with Mo, deep in the Wayless Wood. Mortola and Basta brought us here, and Mortola—'* her voice failed as she said it – *'Mortola shot Mo. Meggie is here too, I don't know exactly where, but please look for her and bring her to me! Protect her as you tried to protect me. But beware of Basta. Resa.'*

'Mortola? Wasn't that what they called the old woman who lived with the fire-raisers?' The man who asked this question had no right hand. A thief – you lost your left hand for stealing a loaf, your right hand for a piece of meat.

'Yes, they say she's poisoned more men than the Adderhead has hairs on his head!' Cloud-Dancer pushed a log of wood back into the fire. 'And it was Basta who slashed Dustfinger's face all that time ago. He won't like to hear those two names.'

‘But Basta’s dead!’ remarked the toothless minstrel. ‘And they’ve been saying the same about the old woman too!’

‘That’s what they tell the children,’ said a man with his back to Resa, ‘so they’ll sleep better. The likes of Mortola don’t die. They only bring death to others.’

They’re not going to help me, thought Resa. Not now they’ve heard those two names. The only one looking at her in anything like a friendly way was a man wearing the black and red of a fire-eater. But Cloud-Dancer was still inspecting her as if he wasn’t sure what to make of her – her and her mysterious message.

Finally, however, and without a word, he took the note from her fingers and put it in the bag he wore at his belt. ‘Very well, I’ll take Dustfinger your message,’ he said. ‘I know where he is.’

He was going to help her after all. Resa could hardly believe it.

‘Oh, thank you.’ Swaying with exhaustion, she straightened up again. ‘When do you think he’ll get the message?’

Cloud-Dancer patted his knee. ‘My leg must get better first.’

‘Of course.’ Resa bit back the words she wanted to shout, begging him to hurry. She mustn’t press him too hard, or he might change his mind, and then who would find Dustfinger for her? A piece of wood broke apart in the flames, spitting out glowing sparks at her feet. ‘I have no money to pay you,’ she said, ‘but perhaps you’ll accept this.’ And she took her wedding ring off her finger and offered it to Cloud-Dancer. The toothless man looked at the gold ring as avidly as if he would like to put his own hand out for it, but Cloud-Dancer shook his head.

‘No, forget it,’ he said. ‘Your husband is sick. It’s bad luck to give away your wedding ring, I’ve heard.’

Bad luck. Resa was quick to put the ring back on her finger. ‘Yes,’ she murmured. ‘Yes, you’re right. Thank you. Thank you with all my heart!’

She turned to go.

‘Hey, you!’ The minstrel whose back had been turned to her was looking at her. He had only two fingers on his right hand. ‘Your husband – he has dark hair. Dark as the fur of a mole. And he’s tall. Very tall.’

Bewildered, Resa looked at him. ‘So?’

‘And then there’s the scar. Just where the songs say. I’ve seen it. Everyone knows how he got it: the Adderhead’s dogs bit him there when he was poaching near the Castle of Night, and he took a stag, one of the White Stags that only the Adderhead himself may kill.’

What on earth was he talking about? Resa remembered what Nettle had said: *And if you’re wise, you won’t let too many of them see that scar on his arm.*

The toothless man laughed. ‘Listen to Twofingers, will you! He thinks it’s the Bluejay lying there in the cave. Since when did you believe in old wives’ tales? Was he wearing his feathered mask?’

‘How should I know?’ snapped Twofingers. ‘Did I bring him here? But I tell you, that’s him!’

Resa sensed that the fire-eater was examining her thoughtfully. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ she said. ‘I don’t know any Bluejay.’

‘You don’t?’ Twofingers picked up the lute lying on the grass beside him. Resa had never before heard the song that he now sang in a soft voice:

***Bright hope arises from the dark
And makes the mighty tremble.
Princes can’t fail to see his mark,
Nor can they now dissemble.
With hair like moleskin smooth and black,
And mask of bluejay feathers,
He vows wrongdoers to attack,***

*Strikes princes in all weathers.
He hunts their game
He robs their gold –
And him they would have slain.
But he's away, he will not stay,
They seek the Jay in vain.*

How they were all looking at her! Resa took a step backwards.

‘I must go to my husband,’ she said. ‘That song ... it has nothing to do with him. Believe me, it doesn’t.’

She felt their eyes on her back as she returned to the cave. Forget them, she told herself. Dustfinger will get your message, that’s all that matters, and he’ll find Meggie and bring her here.

The woman who had taken her place rose without a word and lay down with the others again. Resa was so exhausted that she swayed as she knelt on the dead leaves covering the floor. And the tears came once more. She wiped them away with her sleeve, hid her face in the fabric of her dress that smelled so familiar ... of Elinor’s house, of the old sofa where she used to sit with Meggie – telling her about this world. She began to sob, so loudly that she was afraid she might have woken one of the sleeping company. Alarmed, she pressed her hand to her mouth.

‘Resa?’ It was hardly more than a whisper.

She raised her head. Mo was looking at her. Looking at her.

‘I heard your voice,’ he whispered.

She didn’t know whether to laugh or weep first. She leaned over him and covered his face with kisses. And then she both laughed and wept.

Fenoglio's Plan

All I need is a sheet of paper
and something to write with, and then
I can turn the world upside down.

Friedrich Nietzsche,
Die weisse und die schwarze Kunst

Two days had passed since the festivities at the castle: two days which Fenoglio had spent showing Meggie every nook and cranny of Ombra. 'But today,' he said, before they set off again after eating breakfast with Minerva, 'today I'll show you the river. It's a steep climb down, not very easy for my old bones, but there's nowhere better to talk in peace. And what's more, if we're in luck you may see some river-nymphs down there.' Meggie would have loved to see a river-nymph. She had only come upon a water-nymph so far, in a rather muddy pond in the Wayless Wood, and as soon as Meggie's reflection had fallen on the water the nymph had darted away. But what exactly did Fenoglio want to talk about in peace? It wasn't hard to guess.

What was he going to ask her to read here this time? Or, rather, *who* was he going to ask her to read here – and where from? From another story written by Fenoglio himself?

The path down which he led her wound its way along steeply sloping fields where farmers were working, bent double in the morning sun. How hard it must be growing enough to eat to allow you to survive the winter. And then there were all the creatures who secretly attacked your few provisions: mice, mealworms, maggots, woodlice. Life was much more difficult in Fenoglio's world, yet it seemed to Meggie that with every new day his story was spinning a magic spell around her heart, sticky as spiders' webs, and enchantingly beautiful too ...

Everything around her seemed so real by now. Her homesickness had almost disappeared.

'Come on!' Fenoglio's voice startled her out of her thoughts. The river lay before them, shining in the sun, with faded flowers drifting on the water by its banks. Fenoglio took her hand and led her down the bank, to a place where large rocks stood. Meggie hopefully leaned over the slowly flowing water, but there were no river-nymphs in sight.

'Well, they're timid. Too many people about!' Fenoglio looked disapprovingly at the women doing their washing nearby. He waved to Meggie to walk on until the voices died away, and only the rippling of the water could be heard. Behind them the roofs and towers of Ombra rose against the pale blue sky. The houses were crowded close inside the walls, like birds in a nest too small for them, and the black banners of the castle fluttered above them as if to inscribe the Laughing Prince's grief on the sky itself.

Meggie clambered up on to a flat rock over the water's edge. The river was not broad, but seemed to be deep, and its water was darker than the shadows on the opposite bank.

'Can you see one?' Fenoglio almost slipped off the wet rock as he joined her. Meggie shook her head. 'What's the matter?' Fenoglio knew her well after the days and nights they had spent together in Capricorn's house. 'Not homesick again, are you?'

‘No, no.’ Meggie knelt down and ran her fingers through the cold water. ‘I just had that dream again.’

The previous day, Fenoglio had shown her Bakers’ Alley, the houses where the rich spice and cloth dealers lived, and every gargoyle, every carved flower, every richly adorned frieze with which the skilful stonemasons of Ombra had ornamented the buildings of the city. Judging by the pride Fenoglio displayed as he led Meggie past every corner of Ombra, however remote, he seemed to consider it all his own work. ‘Well, perhaps not *every* corner,’ he admitted, as she once tried getting him to go down an alley she hadn’t seen yet. ‘Of course Ombra has its ugly sides too, but there’s no need for you to bother your pretty head about them.’

It had been dark by the time they were back in his room under Minerva’s roof, and Fenoglio quarrelled with Rosenquartz because the glass man had splattered the fairies with ink. Even though their voices rose louder and louder, Meggie nodded off on the straw mattress that Minerva had sent up the steep staircase for her and that now lay under the window – and suddenly there was all that red, a dull red, shining, wet red, and her heart had started beating faster and faster, ever faster, until its violent thudding woke her with a start ...

‘There, look!’ Fenoglio took her arm.

Rainbow scales shimmered under the watery surface of the river. At first Meggie almost took them for leaves, but then she saw the eyes looking at her, like human eyes yet very different, for they had no whites. The nymph’s arms looked delicate and fragile, almost transparent. Another glance, and then the scaly tail flicked in the water, and there was nothing left to be seen but a shoal of fish gliding by, silvery as a snail track, and a swarm of fire-elves like the elves she and Farid had seen in the forest. Farid. He had made a fiery flower blossom at her feet, a flower just for her. Dustfinger had certainly taught him many wonderful things.

‘I think it’s always the same dream, but I can’t remember. I just remember the fear – as if something terrible had happened!’ She turned to Fenoglio. ‘Do you think it really has?’

‘Nonsense!’ Fenoglio brushed the thought aside like a troublesome insect. ‘We must blame Rosenquartz for your bad dream. I expect the fairies sat on your forehead in the night because he annoyed them! They’re vengeful little things, and I’m afraid it makes no difference to them who they avenge themselves on.’

‘I see.’ Meggie dipped her fingers in the water again. It was so cold that she shivered. She heard the washerwomen laugh, and a fire-elf settled on her wrist. Insect eyes stared at her out of a human face. Meggie quickly shooed the tiny creature away.

‘Very sensible,’ Fenoglio said. ‘You want to be careful of fire-elves. They’ll burn your skin.’

‘I know. Resa told me about them.’ Meggie watched the elf go. There was a sore, red mark on her arm where it had settled.

‘My own invention,’ explained Fenoglio proudly. ‘They produce honey that lets you talk to fire. Very much sought after by fire-eaters, but the elves attack anyone who comes too close to their nests, and few know how to set about stealing the honey without getting badly burned. In fact, now that I come to think of it, probably no one but Dustfinger knows.’

Meggie just nodded. She had hardly been listening. ‘What did you want to talk to me about? You want me to read something, don’t you?’

A few faded red flowers drifted past on the water, red as dried blood, and Meggie’s heart began beating so hard again that she put her hand to her breast. What was the matter with her?

Fenoglio undid the bag at his belt and tipped a domed red stone out into his hand. ‘Isn’t it magnificent?’ he asked. ‘I went to get it this morning while you were still asleep. It’s a beryl, a reading stone. You can use it like spectacles.’

‘I know. What about it?’ Meggie stroked the smooth stone with her fingertips. Mo had several like it, lying on the window-sill of his workshop.

‘What about it? Don’t be so impatient! Violante is almost as blind as a bat, and her delightful son has hidden her old reading stone. So I bought her another, even though it was a ruinous price. I hope she’ll be so grateful that in return she’ll tell us a few things about her late husband! Yes, yes, I know I made up Cosimo myself, but it was long ago that I wrote about him. To be honest, I don’t remember that part particularly well, and what’s more ... who knows how he may have changed, once this story took it into its head to go on telling itself?’

A horrible foreboding came into Meggie’s mind. No, he couldn’t be planning to do that. Not even Fenoglio would think up such an idea. Or would he?

‘Listen, Meggie!’ He lowered his voice, as if the women doing their washing upstream could hear him. ‘The two of us are going to bring Cosimo back!’

Meggie sat up straight, so abruptly that she almost slipped and fell into the river. ‘You’re crazy. Totally crazy! Cosimo’s dead!’

‘Can anyone prove it?’ She didn’t like Fenoglio’s smile one little bit. ‘I told you – his body was burned beyond recognition. Even his father wasn’t sure it was really Cosimo! He waited six months before he would have the dead man buried in the coffin intended for his son.’

‘But it was Cosimo, wasn’t it?’

‘Who’s going to say so? It was a terrible massacre. They say the fire-raisers had been storing some kind of alchemical powder in their fortress, and Firefox set it alight to help him get away. The flames enveloped Cosimo and most of his men, and later no one could identify the dead bodies found among the ruins.’

Meggie shuddered. Fenoglio, on the other hand, seemed greatly pleased by this idea. She couldn't believe how satisfied he looked.

'But it was him, you know it was!' Meggie's voice sank to a whisper. 'Fenoglio, we can't bring back the dead!'

'I know, I know, probably not.' There was deep regret in his voice. 'Although didn't some of the dead come back when you summoned the Shadow?'

'No! They all fell to dust and ashes again only a few days later. Elinor cried her eyes out – she went to Capricorn's village, even though Mo tried to persuade her not to, and there wasn't anyone there either. They'd all gone. For ever.'

'Hm.' Fenoglio stared at his hands. They looked like the hands of a farmer or a craftsman, not hands that wielded only a pen. 'So we can't. Very well!' he murmured. 'Perhaps it's all for the best. How would a story ever work if anyone could just come back from the dead at any time? It would lead to hopeless confusion; it would wreck the suspense! No, you're right: the dead stay dead. So we won't bring Cosimo back, just – well, someone who looks like him!'

'Looks like him? You *are* crazy!' whispered Meggie. 'You're a total lunatic!'

But her opinion did not impress Fenoglio in the slightest. 'So what? All writers are lunatics! I promise you, I'll choose my words very carefully, so carefully that our brand-new Cosimo will be firmly convinced he *is* the old one. Do you see, Meggie? Even if he's only a double, he mustn't know it. On no account is he to know it! What do you think?'

Meggie just shook her head. She hadn't come here to change this world. She'd only wanted to see it!

'Meggie!' Fenoglio placed his hand on her shoulder. 'You saw the Laughing Prince! He could die any day, and then what? It's not just strolling players that the Adderhead strings up! He has his peasants' eyes put out if they catch a rabbit in the forest. He

forces children to work in his silver mines until they're blind and crippled, and he's made Firefox, who is a murderer and arsonist, his own herald!

'Oh yes? And who made him that way? You did!' Meggie angrily pushed his hand away. 'You always did like your villains best.'

'Well, yes, maybe.' Fenoglio shrugged, as if he were powerless to do anything about it. 'But what was I to do? Who wants to read a story about two benevolent princes ruling a merry band of happy, contented subjects? What kind of a story would that be?'

Meggie leaned over the water and fished out one of the red flowers. 'You like making them up!' she said quietly. 'All these monsters.'

Even Fenoglio had no reply to that. So they sat in silence while the women upstream spread their washing on the rocks to dry. It was still warm in the sun, in spite of the faded flowers that the river kept bringing in to the bank.

Fenoglio broke the silence at last. 'Please, Meggie!' he said. 'Just this once. If you help me to get back in control of this story I'll write you the most wonderful words to take you home again – whenever you like! Or if you change your mind because you like my world better, then I'll bring your father here for you, and your mother ... and even that bookworm woman, though from all you tell me she sounds a frightful person!'

That made Meggie laugh. Yes, Elinor would like it here, she thought, and she was sure Resa would like to see the place again. But not Mo. No, never.

She suddenly stood up and smoothed down her dress. Looking up at the castle, she imagined what it would be like if the Adderhead with his salamander gaze ruled up there. She hadn't even liked the Laughing Prince much.

'Meggie, believe me,' said Fenoglio, 'you'd be doing something truly good. You'd be giving a son back to his father,

a husband back to his wife, a father back to his child – yes, I know he’s not a particularly nice child, but all the same! And you’d be helping to thwart the Adderhead’s plans. Surely that’s an honourable thing to do? Please, Meggie!’ He looked at her almost imploringly. ‘Help me. It’s my story, after all! Believe me, I know what’s best for it! Lend me your voice just once more!’

Lend me your voice ... Meggie was still looking up at the castle, but she no longer saw the towers and the black banners. She was seeing the Shadow, and Capricorn lying dead in the dust.

‘All right, I’ll think about it,’ she said. ‘But now Farid is waiting for me.’

Fenoglio looked at her with as much surprise as if she had suddenly sprouted wings. ‘Oh, is he indeed?’ There was no mistaking the disapproval in his voice. ‘But I was going to go up to the castle with you to take Her Ugliness the beryl. I wanted you to hear what she has to say about Cosimo ...’

‘I promised him!’ They had agreed to meet outside the city gates so that Farid wouldn’t have to pass the guards.

‘You promised? Well, never mind. You wouldn’t be the first girl to keep a suitor waiting.’

‘He is not my suitor!’

‘Glad to hear it! Since your father isn’t here, it’s up to me to keep an eye on you, after all.’ Fenoglio looked at her gloomily. ‘You really have grown! The girls here marry at your age. Oh, don’t look at me like that! Minerva’s second daughter has been married for five months, and she was just fourteen. How old is that boy? Fifteen? Sixteen?’

Meggie did not reply, but simply turned her back on him.

Violante

There is no frigate like a book
To take us lands away,
Nor any courser like a page
Of prancing poetry.
This traverse may the poorest take
Without oppress of toll;
How frugal is the chariot
That bears a human soul!

Emily Dickinson,
The Poems of Emily Dickinson

Fenoglio simply persuaded Farid to go up to the castle with them. ‘This will work out very well,’ he whispered to Meggie. ‘He can entertain the Prince’s spoilt brat of a grandson and give us a chance to get Violante to talk in peace.’

The Outer Courtyard lay as if deserted that morning. Only a few dry twigs and squashed cakes showed that there had been festivities here. Grooms, blacksmiths, stable lads were all going about their work again, but an oppressive silence seemed to weigh down on everyone within the walls. On recognizing Fenoglio, the guards of the Inner Castle let them pass without a word, and a group of men in grey robes, grave-faced, came towards them beneath the trees of the Inner Courtyard.

‘Physicians!’ muttered Fenoglio, uneasily watching them go. ‘More than enough of them to cure a dozen men to death. This bodes no good.’

The servant whom Fenoglio buttonholed outside the throne-room looked pale and tired. The Prince of Sighs, he told Fenoglio in a whisper, had taken to his bed during his grandson’s celebrations and hadn’t left it since. He would not eat or drink, and he had sent a messenger to the stonemason carving his sarcophagus telling him to hurry up about it.

But they were allowed in to visit Violante. The Prince would see neither his daughter-in-law nor his grandson. He had sent even the physicians away. He would have no one near him but his furry-faced page Tullio.

‘She’s where she ought not to be, again!’ The servant was whispering as if he could be heard by the sick Prince in his apartments as he led them through the castle. A carved likeness of Cosimo looked down on them in every corridor. Now that Meggie knew about Fenoglio’s plans, the stony eyes made her even more uncomfortable. ‘They all have the same face!’ Farid whispered to her, but before Meggie could explain why the servant was beckoning them silently up a spiral staircase.

‘Does Balbulus still ask such a high price for letting Violante into the library?’ asked Fenoglio quietly as their guide stopped at a door, which was adorned with brass letters.

‘Poor thing, she’s given him almost all her jewellery,’ the servant whispered back. ‘But there you are, he used to live in the Castle of Night, didn’t he? Everyone knows that those who live on the other side of the forest are greedy folk. With the exception of my mistress.’

‘Come in!’ called a bad-tempered voice when the servant knocked. The room they entered was so bright that it made Meggie blink after walking through all those dark passages and up the dark stairs. Daylight fell through high windows on to several intricately carved desks. The man standing at the largest

of them was neither young nor old, and he had black hair and brown eyes which looked at them without any cordiality as he turned to them.

‘Ah, the Inkweaver!’ he said, reluctantly putting down the hare’s foot he held in his hand. Meggie knew what it was for; Mo had told her often enough. Rubbing parchment with a hare’s foot made it smooth. And there were the colours whose names Mo had repeated over and over to her. *Tell me again!* How often she had plagued Mo with that demand! She never tired of the sound of them: lapis lazuli, orpiment, violet, malachite green. What makes them still shine like that, Mo? she had asked. After all, they’re so old! What are they made of? And Mo had told her – told her how you made them, all those wonderful colours that shone even after hundreds of years as if they had been stolen from the rainbow, now protected from air and light between the pages of books. To make malachite green you pounded wild iris flowers and mixed them with yellow lead oxide; the red was made from murex shells and cochineal insects ... they had so often stood together looking at the pictures in one of the valuable manuscripts that Mo was to free from the grime of many years. Look at those delicate tendrils, he had said, can you imagine how fine the pens and brushes must be to paint something like that, Meggie? He was always complaining that no one could make such implements any more. And now she saw them with her own eyes, pens as fine as hairs and tiny brushes, whole sets of them standing in a glazed jug: brushes that could conjure up flowers and faces no bigger than a pinhead on parchment or paper. You moistened them with a little gum arabic to make the paint cling better. Her fingers itched to pick a brush out of the set and take it away with her for Mo ... he ought to have come just for this, she thought, to stand here in this room.

An illuminator’s workshop ... Fenoglio’s world seemed twice, three times as wonderful. Elinor would have given one of her little fingers to be standing here now, thought Meggie. She was

about to move towards one of the desks to take a closer look at it all, the brushes, the pigments, the parchment, but Fenoglio held her back.

‘Balbulus!’ He sketched a bow. ‘And how is the master today?’ There was no mistaking the mockery in his voice.

‘The Inkweaver wants to see the Lady Violante,’ said the servant in a low voice.

Balbulus pointed to a door behind him. ‘Well, you know where the library is. Or perhaps we had better rename it the Chamber of Forgotten Treasures.’ He lisped slightly, his tongue touching his teeth as if it didn’t have enough room in his mouth. ‘Violante is just looking at my latest work, or what she can see of it. I finished copying out the stories for her son last night. I’d rather have used the parchment for other texts, I must admit, but Violante insisted.’

‘Well, I’m sorry you had to waste your art on such frivolities,’ replied Fenoglio, without so much as glancing at the work Balbulus had before him at the moment. Farid did not seem interested in the picture either. He looked at the window, where the sky outside shone a brighter blue than any of the paints sticking to the fine brushes. But Meggie wanted to see how good Balbulus was at his art, and whether his haughty attitude was justified. Unobtrusively, she took a step forward. She saw a picture framed in gold leaf, showing a castle among green hills, a forest, magnificently dressed riders among the trees, fairies fluttering around them, and a white stag turning to flee. Never before had she seen such a picture. It glowed like stained glass – like a window placed on the parchment. She would have loved to look at it more closely, see the faces, the horses’ harnesses, the flowers and clouds, but Balbulus cast her such an icy glance that she retreated, blushing.

‘That poem you brought yesterday,’ said Balbulus in a bored voice, as he bent over his work again, ‘it was good. You ought to write such things more often, but I know you prefer writing

stories for children or songs for the Motley Folk. And why? Just for the wind to sing your words? The spoken word is nothing, it hardly lives longer than an insect! Only the written word is eternal.'

'Eternal?' Fenoglio made the word sound as if there could be nothing more ridiculous in the world. 'Nothing's eternal – and what happier fate could words have than to be sung by minstrels? Yes, of course they change the words, they sing them slightly differently every time, but isn't that in itself wonderful? A story wearing another dress every time you hear it – what could be better? A story that grows and puts out flowers like a living thing! But look at the stories people press in books! They may last longer, yes, but they breathe only when someone opens the book. They are sound pressed between the pages, and only a voice can bring them back to life! Then they throw off sparks, Balbulus! Then they go free as birds flying out into the world. Perhaps you're right, and the paper makes them immortal. But why should I care? Will I live on, neatly pressed between the pages with my words? Nonsense! We're none of us immortal; even the finest words don't change that, do they?'

Balbulus had listened to him without any expression on his face. 'What an unusual opinion, Inkweaver!' he said. 'For my part, I think highly of the immortality of my work, and very poorly of minstrels. But why don't you go in to Violante? She'll probably have to leave soon, to hear some peasant's woes or listen to a merchant complaining of the highwaymen who make the roads unsafe. It's almost impossible to get hold of acceptable parchment these days. Robbers steal it and offer it for sale in the markets at outrageous prices! Have you any idea how many goats must be slaughtered for me to write down one of your stories?'

'About one for each double spread,' said Meggie, earning another icy look from Balbulus.

'Clever girl,' he said, in a tone that made his words sound more like blame than praise. 'And why? Because those fools the

goatherds drive them through thorns and prickly bushes, without stopping to think that their skins will be needed for parchment!’

‘Oh, come, I keep telling you!’ said Fenoglio, steering Meggie and Farid towards the library door. ‘Paper, Balbulus. Paper is the material of the future.’

‘Paper!’ she heard Balbulus mutter scornfully. ‘Good heavens, Inkweaver, you’re even crazier than I thought.’

Meggie had visited more libraries with Mo than she could count. Many had been larger than the Laughing Prince’s, but few were more beautiful. You could still see that it had once been its owner’s favourite place. The only trace of Cosimo here was a white stone bust; someone had laid roses in front of it. The tapestries on the high walls were finer than those in the throne-room, the sconces heavier, the colours warmer, and Meggie had seen enough in Balbulus’s workshop to guess what treasures surrounded her here. They stood chained to the shelves, not spine beside spine like the books in Elinor’s library, but with the cut edge facing forward, because that was where the title was. In front of the shelves were rows of desks, presumably reserved for the latest precious acquisitions. Books lay on them, chained like their sisters in the shelves, and closed so that no harmful ray of light could fall on Balbulus’s pictures. In addition all the library windows were hung with heavy fabric; obviously the Prince of Sighs knew what damage sunlight did to books. Only two windows let in the light that might harm them. Her Ugliness stood in front of one window, bending so low over a book that her nose almost touched the pages.

‘Balbulus is getting better and better, Brianna,’ she said.

‘He’s greedy! A pearl, just for letting you into your father-in-law’s library!’ Her maidservant was standing at the other window looking out, while Violante’s son tugged at her hand.

‘Brianna!’ he whined. ‘Come on! This is boring. Come on out into the courtyard. You promised.’

‘He uses the money from the pearls to buy new pigments! How else would he get them, when no one in this castle will pay gold for anything but statues of a dead man?’ Violante jumped when Fenoglio closed the door behind him, guiltily hiding the book behind her back. Only when she saw who it was did her face relax. ‘Fenoglio!’ she said, pushing her mousy brown hair back from her forehead. ‘Must you scare me like that?’ The mark on her face was like a paw-print.

Fenoglio smiled, and put his hand to the bag at his belt. ‘I’ve brought you something.’

Violante’s fingers closed greedily on the red stone. Her hands were small and rounded like a child’s. She quickly reopened the book she had hidden behind her back and held the beryl up to one of her eyes.

‘Come on, Brianna, or I’ll tell them to cut your hair off!’ Jacopo took a handful of the maid’s hair and pulled it so hard that she screamed. ‘That’s what my grandfather does. He shaves them bald, the minstrel girls and the women who live in the forest. He says they turn into owls by night and screech outside your windows till you’re dead in your bed.’

‘Don’t look at me like that!’ Fenoglio whispered to Meggie. ‘I didn’t invent this little horror. Here, Jacopo!’ He dug his elbow imperatively into Farid’s ribs as Brianna went on trying to free her hair from the child’s small fingers. ‘Look, I’ve brought someone to see you.’

Jacopo let go of Brianna’s hair and examined Farid with little enthusiasm. ‘He doesn’t have a sword,’ he pointed out.

‘A sword! Who needs a sword?’ Fenoglio wrinkled his nose. ‘Farid is a fire-eater.’

Brianna raised her head and looked at Farid. But Jacopo was still inspecting him as unenthusiastically as ever.

‘Oh, this stone is wonderful!’ his mother murmured. ‘My old one wasn’t half so good. I can make them all out, Brianna, every character. Did I ever tell you how my mother taught me to read by making up a little song for each letter?’ She began to chant quietly: ‘*A brown bear bites off a big bit of B ...* I didn’t see particularly well even then, but she traced them on the floor very large for me, laying them out with flower petals or little stones. *A, B, C, the minstrel plays for me.*’

‘No,’ said Brianna. ‘No, you never told me.’

Jacopo was still staring at Farid. ‘He was at my festivities!’ he said. ‘He threw torches.’

‘That was nothing, just a children’s game.’ Farid was looking patronizingly at the boy, as if he himself and not Jacopo were the Prince’s son. ‘I can do other tricks too, but I don’t think you’re old enough for them.’

Meggie saw Brianna hide a smile as she took the comb out of her pale red hair and pinned it up again. She did it very prettily. Farid was watching her, and for the first time in her life Meggie wished that she had such lovely hair, although she wasn’t sure that she could manage to put a comb in it so gracefully. Luckily Jacopo attracted Farid’s attention again by clearing his throat and folding his arms. He had probably copied the mannerism from his grandfather.

‘Show me or I’ll have you whipped.’ The threat sounded ridiculous, uttered in such a shrill voice – yet at the same time it was more terrible than if it had come from an adult mouth.

‘Oh, will you?’ Farid’s face gave nothing away. He had obviously learned a thing or two from Dustfinger. ‘And what do you think I’d do to you then?’

This left Jacopo speechless, but just as he was about to appeal to his mother for support Farid reached out his hand to the boy. ‘Very well, come along, then.’

Jacopo hesitated, and for a moment Meggie was tempted to take Farid’s hand herself and follow him into the courtyard,

instead of listening to Fenoglio trying to follow a dead man's trail, but Jacopo moved faster. His pale, stubby fingers gripped Farid's brown hand tightly, and when he turned in the doorway his face was that of a happy, perfectly ordinary little boy. 'He's going to show me tricks, did you hear?' he said proudly, but his mother didn't even look up.

'Oh, what a wonderful stone,' was all she whispered. 'If only it wasn't red, if only I had one for each eye—'

'Well, I'm working on a way around that, but I'm afraid I haven't found the right glassmaker yet.' With a sigh, Fenoglio dropped into one of the chairs invitingly arranged among the reading desks. They all bore the old coat of arms on their leather upholstery, the one where the lion was not shedding tears, and the leather of some was so worn that you could clearly tell how many hours the Laughing Prince had once spent here – until grief sapped his pleasure in books.

'A glassmaker? Why a glassmaker?' Violante gazed at Fenoglio through the beryl. It looked almost as if her eye was made of fire.

'Glass can be ground to make your eyes see better, much better than through a stone, but there isn't a glazier in Ombra who knows what I'm talking about!'

'Oh, I know, only the stonemasons are good for anything in this place! Balbulus says there's not a single decent book-binder in all Lombrica.'

I could tell you the name of a good one, thought Meggie instinctively, and for a moment she wished Mo were here, so much that it hurt. But Her Ugliness was looking at her book again. 'There are good glaziers in my father's realm,' she said, without glancing up. 'He's had several windows in his castle filled in with glass. He had to sell off a hundred of his peasants to go for soldiers to pay for it.' Violante seemed to consider the price well worth paying.

I don't think I like her, thought Meggie, as she went slowly from desk to desk. The bindings of the books lying on them were beautiful, and she would have loved to hide at least one of them under her dress, so that she could look at it in Fenoglio's room at her leisure, but the clips holding the chains in place were firmly riveted to the wooden covers of the books.

'You're welcome to look at them.' Her Ugliness spoke to Meggie so suddenly that she jumped. Violante was still holding the red stone up to her eye, and Meggie was reminded of the blood-red jewels at the corners of the Adderhead's nostrils. His daughter resembled her father more than she probably knew.

'Thank you,' murmured Meggie, and opened one. She remembered the day when Mo had shown her how to open an old book without using her fingers. He had handed her a book with two brass clasps holding its wooden covers together, she had looked at him, baffled, and then, smiling at her, he had struck the front of the book so hard with his fist that the clasps snapped open like little mouths, and the book was opened as if by a ghostly hand.

But the book that Meggie opened in the Laughing Prince's library showed no sign of age, as that other book had done. No speck of mould disfigured the parchment, no beetles or bookworms had nibbled it, like some of the manuscripts she had seen when Mo restored them. The years were not kind to parchment and paper; a book had many enemies, and in time it withered like a human body. 'Which tells us, Meggie,' Mo always said, 'that a book is a living thing!' If only she could have shown him this one!

Very, very carefully she turned the pages – yet her mind was not entirely on what she was doing, for the wind blew Farid's voice into the room like the memory of another world. Meggie listened to what was going on outside as she snapped the clasps of the book shut again. Fenoglio and Violante were still talking about useless bookbinders. Neither of them was taking any notice of her, and Meggie stole over to one of the darkened

windows and peered through the gap in the curtains. Her glance fell on a walled garden, beds full of brightly coloured flowers, and Farid standing among them letting flames lick their way up his bare arms, just as Dustfinger had done the first time Meggie saw him breathing fire back in Elinor's garden, before he betrayed her ...

Jacopo was laughing exuberantly. He clapped – and then stumbled back in alarm as Farid sent the torches whirling through the air like Catherine wheels. Meggie couldn't help smiling; Dustfinger had certainly taught him a lot, even if Farid couldn't yet breathe fire quite so high in the air as his teacher.

'Books? No, I told you, Cosimo never came in here!' Violante's voice suddenly sounded considerably sharper, and Meggie turned round. 'He thought nothing of books, he loved dogs, good boots, a fast horse ... there were days when he even loved his son. But I don't want to talk about him.'

Laughter drifted up from outside again. Brianna joined Meggie at the window. 'The boy's a very good fire-eater,' she said.

'Really?' Her short-sighted mistress looked at her. 'I thought you didn't like fire-eaters. You're always saying they're feckless folk.'

'This one's good. Much better than Sootbird.' Brianna's voice sounded husky. 'I noticed him at the celebrations.'

'Violante!' Fenoglio sounded impatient. 'Could we forget about that fire-breathing boy for a moment? Very well, so Cosimo didn't like books. These things happen. But surely you can tell me a little more about him!'

'Why?' Her Ugliness raised the beryl to her eye again. 'Let Cosimo rest in peace, he's dead! The dead don't want to linger here. Why won't anyone understand that? And if you want to know some secret about him – well, he had none! He could talk about weapons for hours on end. He liked fire-eaters and knife-throwers and wild rides through the night. He had the smiths

show him how to forge a sword, and he fenced for hours with the guards down in the courtyard until he'd mastered every trick they knew, but when the minstrels struck up their songs he began yawning after the first verse. He wouldn't have cared for any of the songs you've written about him. He might have liked the robber songs, but as for the idea that words can be like music, making the heart beat faster ... he had no ear for that! Even executions interested him more than words, although he never enjoyed them the way my father does.'

'Really?' Fenoglio sounded surprised but by no means disappointed. 'Wild rides through the night,' he murmured. 'Fast horses. Yes, why not?'

Her Ugliness wasn't listening to him. 'Brianna!' she said. 'Take this book. If I praise Balbulus enough for his new pictures, perhaps he'll leave it with us for a while.' Her maid took the book from her, an abstracted expression on her face, and went to the window again.

'But the people loved him, didn't they?' Fenoglio had risen from his chair. 'Cosimo was good to them ... to the peasants, the poor ... the strolling players.'

Violante stroked the mark on her cheek. 'Yes, they all loved him. He was so handsome that you just had to love him. You couldn't help it. But as for the peasants—' and she wearily rubbed her short-sighted eyes – 'do you know what he always said about them? Why are they so ugly, he asked? Ugly clothes, ugly faces ... when they brought their disputes to him he really did try to do justice fairly, but it bored him to tears. He could hardly wait to get away again, back to his father's soldiers, his horse and his hounds ...'

Fenoglio said nothing. He looked so baffled that Meggie almost felt sorry for him. Isn't he going to make me read aloud after all, she wondered? And for a strange moment she felt something like disappointment.

‘Come along, Brianna!’ ordered Her Ugliness, but her maid did not stir. She was gazing down at the courtyard as if she had never seen a fire-eater in her life before.

Frowning, Violante went over to her. ‘What are you staring at?’ she asked, squinting through the window with her short-sighted eyes.

‘He ... he’s making flowers from fire,’ stammered Brianna. ‘They start like golden buds and then they unfold like real flowers. I once saw something like that ... when I was very little ...’

‘Yes, very nice, but come along now.’ Her Ugliness turned and made for the door. She had an odd way of walking, with her head slightly bent, yet carrying herself very upright. Brianna took a last look out of the window before hurrying after her.

Balbulus was grinding colours when they entered his workshop: blue for the sky, russet and umber for the earth. Violante whispered something to him. Presumably she was softening him up. She pointed to the book that Brianna was carrying for her.

‘I’ll be off now, Your Highness,’ said Fenoglio.

‘Yes, you can go!’ she told him. ‘But next time you visit me don’t ask questions about my late husband, bring me one of the songs you write for the minstrels instead. I like them very much, particularly those songs about the robber, the man who makes my father so angry. What’s his name? Oh yes – the Bluejay!’

Fenoglio paled slightly under his sunburn. ‘How do you know I wrote those songs?’

Her Ugliness just laughed. ‘I’m the Adderhead’s daughter, have you forgotten? Of course I have my spies! They’re good, too! Are you afraid I’ll tell my father who wrote the songs? Don’t worry, we say only the bare minimum to each other. And he’s more interested in what the songs are about than in the

man who wrote them. Although if I were you I'd stay this side of the forest for now!

Fenoglio bowed, forcing a smile. 'I shall take your advice to heart, Highness,' he said.

The door with brass letters on it latched heavily into place as Fenoglio pulled it shut. 'Curse it!' he muttered. 'Curse it, curse it.'

'What's the matter?' Meggie looked at him with concern. 'Is it what she said about Cosimo?'

'No, nonsense! But if Violante knows who writes the songs about the Bluejay, then so does the Adderhead! He has many more spies than she does, and suppose he doesn't keep to his own side of the forest much longer? Well, there's still time to do something about it ... Meggie,' he whispered, as they went down the steep spiral staircase. 'I told you I had a model for the Bluejay. Do you want to guess who it was?' He looked expectantly at her. 'I like to base my characters on real people,' he whispered in conspiratorial tones. 'Not every writer does that, but in my experience it makes them more lifelike. Facial expressions, gestures, the way someone walks, a voice, perhaps a birthmark or a scar – I steal something here, something there, and then they begin to breathe, until anyone hearing or reading about them thinks they can touch them! I didn't have a wide choice for the Bluejay. My model couldn't be too old, nor too young either, and not fat or short, of course, heroes are never short, fat or ugly – in real life, maybe, but never in stories ... no, the Bluejay had to be tall and good-looking, attractive to other people—'

Fenoglio fell silent. Footsteps were coming down the stairs, quick footsteps, and Brianna appeared on the massive steps above them.

'Excuse me,' she said, and looked around guiltily, as if she had stolen away without her mistress's knowledge. 'That boy – do you know who taught him to play with fire like that?' She

looked at Fenoglio as if she wanted to hear the answer more than anything, and yet as if at the same time there was nothing she feared hearing more. 'Do you know?' she asked again. 'Do you know his name?'

'Dustfinger,' replied Meggie, speaking for Fenoglio. 'Dustfinger taught him.' And only when she spoke the name for the second time did she realize who Brianna reminded her of, her face and the shimmer of her red hair.



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The Wrong Words

If all you have of me is your red hair
and my whole-hearted laughter
what else in me was good or ill may fare
like faded flowers drifting in the water.

Paul Zech, after François Villon,
'The Ballade of Little Florestan'

Dustfinger was just chasing Jink out of Roxane's henhouse when Brianna came riding into the yard. The sight of her almost stopped his heart. The dress she wore made her look like a rich merchant's daughter; since when did maidservants wear such clothes? And the horse she was riding didn't suit this place either, with its expensive harness, its gold-studded saddle, and the deep black coat that shone as if three grooms had spent all day brushing it. A soldier in the Laughing Prince's livery rode with her. He scrutinized the simple house and the fields, his face expressionless. But Brianna looked at Dustfinger. She thrust out her chin just as her mother so often did, straightened the comb in her hair – and looked at him.

He wished he could have made himself invisible. How hostile her glance was, her expression both adult and that of an injured child! She was so like her mother. The soldier helped her to

dismount and then took his horse to drink at the well, acting as if he had neither eyes nor ears.

Roxane came out of the house. Brianna's arrival obviously surprised her as much as him. 'Why didn't you tell me he was back?' Brianna snapped. Roxane opened her mouth – and shut it again.

Go on, say something, Dustfinger, he told himself. The marten leaped off his shoulder and disappeared behind the stable.

'I asked her not to.' How hoarse his voice sounded. 'I thought I'd rather tell you myself.' But your father is a coward, he added to himself, afraid of his own daughter.

She was looking at him so angrily, in exactly her old way. Except that now she was too grown-up to hit him.

'I saw that boy,' she said. 'He was at the festival, and today he was breathing fire for Jacopo. He did it just like you.'

Dustfinger saw Farid appear. He stayed behind Roxane, but Jehan pushed past him, glanced anxiously at the soldier and then ran to his sister. 'Where did you get that horse?' he asked.

'Violante gave it to me. As thanks for taking her with me by night to see the strolling players.'

'You take her with you?' Roxane sounded concerned.

'Why not? She loves their shows! And the Black Prince says it's all right.' Brianna didn't look at her mother.

Farid went over to Dustfinger. 'What does she want here?' he whispered. 'She's Her Ugliness's maid.'

'And my daughter too,' replied Dustfinger.

Farid stared incredulously at Brianna, but she took no notice of him. It was on her father's account that she had come.

'Ten years!' she said accusingly. 'You stayed away for ten years, and now you come back just like that? Everyone said you were dead! They said you'd mouldered away in the Adderhead's

dungeons! They said the fire-raisers had handed you over to him because you wouldn't tell them all your secrets!

'I did tell them,' said Dustfinger tonelessly. 'Almost all my secrets.' And they used them to set another world on fire, he added in his thoughts. A world without a door to let me out again, so that I could come back.

'I dreamed of you!' Brianna's voice rose so high that her horse shied away. 'I dreamed the men-at-arms tied you to a stake and burned you! I could smell the smoke and hear you trying to talk to the fire, but it wouldn't obey you and the flames devoured you. I had that dream almost every night! I still do! I was afraid of going to sleep for ten whole years, and now here you are, hale and hearty, as if nothing had happened! Where – have – you – *been?*'

Dustfinger glanced at Roxane – and saw the same question in her eyes. 'I couldn't come back,' he said. 'I couldn't. I tried, believe me, I tried.'

The wrong words. They were true a hundred times over, yet they sounded like a lie. Hadn't he always known it? Words were useless. At times they might sound wonderful, but they let you down the moment you really needed them. You could never find the right words, never, and where would you look for them? The heart is as silent as a fish, however much the tongue tries to give it a voice.

Brianna turned her back on him and buried her face in her horse's mane, while the soldier went on standing by the well, acting as if he were nothing but thin air.

And that's what I wish I was too, thought Dustfinger. Just thin air.

'But it's the truth! He couldn't come back!' Farid stationed himself protectively in front of Dustfinger. 'There wasn't any way! It's exactly like he says – he was in an entirely different world, but it's as real as this one. There are many, many worlds, they're all different, and they're written down in books!'

Brianna turned to him. 'Do I look like a little girl who still believes in fairy-tales?' she asked scornfully. 'Once, when he stayed away so long that my mother's eyes were red with crying every morning, the other strolling players told me stories about him. They said he was talking to the fairies, or he'd gone to see the giants, or he was down at the bottom of the sea looking for a fire that even water can't put out. I didn't believe the stories even then, but I liked them. Now I don't. I'm not a little girl any more. Not by any means. Help me mount my horse!' she ordered the soldier.

He obeyed without a word. Jehan stared at the sword hanging from his belt.

'Stay and eat with us!' said Roxane.

But Brianna just shook her head and turned her horse in silence. The soldier winked at Jehan, who was still gazing at his sword. They rode away on their horses, which seemed much too large for the narrow, stony path leading to Roxane's farm.

Roxane took Jehan indoors with her, but Dustfinger stayed out by the stable until the two riders had disappeared into the hills. Farid's voice quivered with indignation when he finally broke the silence. 'But you really couldn't come back!'

'No ... but you must admit your story didn't sound very likely.'

'It's exactly what happened, all the same!'

Dustfinger shrugged, and looked at the place in the distance where his daughter had disappeared. 'Sometimes even I think I only dreamed it all,' he murmured.

A chicken squawked angrily behind them.

'Where the devil is Jink?' With a curse, Dustfinger opened the stable door. A white hen fluttered past him into the open; another fowl lay in the straw, her feathers bloody. A marten was sitting beside her.

‘Jink!’ Dustfinger scolded. ‘Damn it, didn’t I tell you to leave the chickens alone?’

The marten looked at him.

Feathers were sticking to the animal’s muzzle. He stretched, raised his bushy tail, came to Dustfinger, and rubbed against his legs like a cat.

‘Well, what do you know?’ whispered Dustfinger. ‘Hello, Gwin.’

His death was back.



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New Masters

**Tyrants smile with their last breath
For they know that at their death,
Tyranny just changes hands,
Serfdom lives on in their lands.**

**Heinrich Heine,
'King David'**

The Prince of Sighs, once the Laughing Prince, died scarcely a day after Meggie had been to the castle with Fenoglio. He died at dawn, and the men-at-arms rode into Ombra three days later. Meggie was in the market place with Minerva when they came. After her father-in-law's death Violante had ordered the guard at the city gate to be doubled, but there were so many men-at-arms that the guards let them in without offering any resistance. The Piper rode at their head, his silver nose like a beak in the middle of his face, as shiny as if he had polished it up specially for the occasion. The narrow streets echoed with the snorting of horses, and it was quiet as the mounted men appeared among the buildings. The street cries of traders, the voices of women crowding around the stalls, all fell silent when the Piper reined in his horse and disapprovingly scrutinized the crowd.

‘Make way!’ he called. His voice sounded oddly strained, but what else would you expect of a man who had no nose? ‘Make way for the envoy of the Adderhead. We are here to pay his last respects to your dead Prince and ensure that his grandson takes his rightful place as his heir.’

The silence continued, but then a single voice was raised. ‘Thursday’s market day in Ombra, always was, so if you gentlemen would like to dismount, we can get on with it!’

The Piper looked for the speaker among the faces staring up at him, but the man was hidden by the crowd. A murmur of agreement rose in the market place.

‘Oh, so that’s it!’ cried the Piper through the confused voices. ‘You think we rode right through that accursed forest just to dismount here and make our way through a rabble of stinking peasants. As soon as the cat’s dead the mice dance on the table. But I have news for you. There’s a cat in your miserable town again, a cat with sharper claws than the old one!’

Without another word, he turned in the saddle, raised his black-gloved hand – and gave his men a signal.

Then he rode his horse straight into the crowd.

The silence that had been weighing down so heavily on the market place was torn like rending cloth. Screams rose in its enclosed space. More and more horsemen rode in from among the houses around it, so heavily armed they looked like iron reptiles, their helmets drawn so far down that you could see only their mouths and their eyes between nose-guard and rim. There was a clinking of spurs, a clashing of greaves and breastplates so brightly polished that they reflected the crowd’s horrified faces. Minerva pushed her children out of the way. Despina stumbled, and Meggie was going to her aid when she herself tripped over a couple of cabbages and fell flat. A stranger pulled her to her feet just before the Piper rode her down. Meggie heard his horse snorting above her, felt his gleaming spurs brush her shoulder. She took shelter behind a

potter's overturned stall, although she cut her hands on his broken pots. Trembling, she crouched among the shards, surrounded by smashed barrels and sacks that had burst open, watching helplessly as others, less lucky, fell under the horses' hooves. The mounted men struck out at many in the crowd with their feet or the shafts of their spears. Horses shied, reared, and kicked at pots and people's heads.

Then, just as suddenly as they had come, the men-at-arms were gone. Only the sound of their horses' hooves could still be heard as they rode fast up the street to the castle. The market place was left looking as if a strong wind had blown through it, an ill wind breaking jugs and pots as well as human bones. There was a smell of fear in the air as Meggie crawled out from behind the barrels. Peasants were gathering up their trampled vegetables, mothers wiped tears from their children's faces and blood from their knees, women stood looking at the broken earthenware dishes they had hoped to sell – and all was quiet in the market place again. Very quiet. The voices cursing the horsemen did so in undertones, and even the weeping and groaning were muted. Minerva came over to Meggie, concern in her face, with the sobbing Despina and Ivo beside her.

'Yes, I think we have a new master now,' she said bitterly, helping Meggie to her feet. 'Can you take the children home? I'll stay here and see what I can do to help. There must be many broken bones, but luckily a few physicians can always be found here on market day.'

Meggie just nodded. She didn't know how she felt. Afraid? Angry? Desperate? There didn't seem to be any word to describe the state of her heart. Silently, she took Despina and Ivo by the hand and set off home with them. Her knees hurt, and she was limping, but nonetheless she hurried along the alleys so fast that the children could hardly keep up.

'Now!' She uttered just that one word as she hobbled into Fenoglio's room. 'Let me read it now. At once.' Her voice shook,

and she had to lean against the bare wall because her grazed knees were trembling. Indeed, everything in her and about her was trembling.

‘What’s happened?’ Fenoglio was sitting at his desk. The parchment lying before him was covered with words. Rosenquartz stood beside him with a dripping pen in his hand, looking at Meggie in astonishment.

‘We must do it now!’ she cried. ‘This minute! They just rode into the middle of the crowd – into all those people!’

‘Ah, so the soldiers are here already. Well, I told you we must hurry. Who was leading them? Firefox?’

‘No, it was the Piper.’ Meggie went over to the bed and sat down on it. Suddenly she felt only fear, as if she were back kneeling among the toppled stalls again, and her fury had run out of steam. ‘There are so many of them!’ she whispered. ‘It’s too late! What could Cosimo do against them?’

‘You just leave that to me!’ Fenoglio took the pen from the glass man’s hand and began writing again. ‘The Laughing Prince has many soldiers too, and they’ll follow Cosimo once he’s back. Of course, it would have been better if you’d read him here while his father was still alive. The Laughing Prince was in rather too much of a hurry to die, but that can’t be helped now! Other things can be, though.’ With his brow furrowed, he read through what he had written, crossed out a word here, added one there, and then waved his hand to the glass man. ‘Sand, Rosenquartz, hurry up!’

Meggie pulled her skirt up and looked at her injured knees. One of them was beginning to swell. ‘But are you sure it will really be any better with Cosimo?’ she asked in a low voice. ‘From what Her Ugliness said about him, it didn’t sound like it.’

‘Of course it will be better! What kind of question is that? Cosimo is one of the good characters and always was, never mind what Violante says. Anyway, when you read this aloud

you'll be bringing a new version of him here. An improved version, we might say.'

'But ... but why does there have to be a new prince here at all?' Meggie passed her sleeve over her tear-stained face. The clank of armour was still echoing in her ears, the snorting and whinnying, the screaming – the screams of people who wore no armour.

'What can be better than a prince who does what we want?' Fenoglio took another sheet of parchment. 'Just a few more lines,' he murmured. 'I've almost finished. Oh, curse it, how I hate writing on parchment. I hope you ordered more paper, Rosenquartz.'

'Of course I did, long ago,' replied the glass man, huffily. 'But there haven't been any deliveries for ages. The paper mill's on the other side of the forest, remember?'

'Yes, a pity.' Fenoglio wrinkled his nose. 'Very inconvenient, to be sure.'

'Fenoglio, listen to me, will you? Why don't we read that robber here instead of Cosimo?' Meggie pulled her skirt down over her knees again. 'You know – the robber in your songs! The Bluejay!'

Fenoglio laughed out loud. 'The Bluejay? Good heavens! I'd like to see your face if— but joking aside, no – absolutely not! A robber's not fit to rule, Meggie. Robin Hood didn't become king! Robbers are good for stirring up trouble, that's all. I couldn't even put the Black Prince on the throne here. This world is ruled by royalty, not robbers, entertainers or peasants. That's the way I made it, and I assure you it's a royal prince we need.'

Rosenquartz sharpened another quill and dipped it in the ink, and Fenoglio began writing again. 'Yes,' Meggie heard him whispering. 'Yes, this will sound wonderful when you read it aloud. What a surprise for the Adderhead! He thinks he can do

what he likes in my world, do exactly as he pleases, but he's wrong. He'll play the part I give him and no other!'

Meggie rose from the bed and limped over to the window. It had begun to rain again; the sky was weeping as silently as the people in the market place. And the Adderhead's banner was already being hoisted above the castle.



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Cosimo

‘Yes,’ said Abhorsen. ‘I am a necromancer, but not of the common kind. Where others of the art raise the dead, I lay them back to rest ...’

**Garth Nix,
*Sabriel***

It was dark when Fenoglio finally put his pen aside. All was still in the alley below. It had been quiet there all day, as if the people had fled indoors like mice hiding from the cat.

‘Have you finished?’ asked Meggie, as Fenoglio leaned back and rubbed his weary eyes. Her voice sounded faint and afraid, not like a voice that could awaken a prince and bring him to life, but after all, she had already made a monster rise from Fenoglio’s words, even if that was long ago – and Mo, not she, had read the very last words.

Mo. After what had happened in the market place, she missed him more than ever.

‘Yes, I’ve finished!’ Fenoglio sounded as pleased with himself as he had in Capricorn’s village, when he and Meggie between them first planned a way to alter his story. All had ended well that time, but now ... now she was in the story herself. Did that make Fenoglio’s words stronger or weaker? Meggie had told him about Orpheus’s rule – that it was better to use only words

that were in the story already – but Fenoglio had just dismissed the idea. ‘Nonsense. Remember how we wrote a happy ending before for the Steadfast Tin Soldier? Did I stop to make sure I was using only words out of his own story? No, I didn’t. Perhaps that rule applies to people like this man Orpheus, people who venture to mess about with other writers’ stories, but surely not for an author setting out to change his own!’

Meggie hoped he was right.

Fenoglio had crossed out a good deal, but his handwriting had indeed become more legible. Meggie looked along the lines. Yes, this time they were Fenoglio’s own words, not stolen from any other writer ...

‘Good, isn’t it?’ He dipped a piece of bread in the soup that Minerva had brought up for them hours ago, and looked expectantly at Meggie. Of course the soup was cold. Neither of them could even have thought of eating until now, and Rosenquartz was the only one who had drunk some of the soup. It had made his whole body change colour, until Fenoglio firmly took his tiny spoon away from him and asked if he wanted to kill himself.

‘Leave that alone, Rosenquartz!’ he now added sternly, as the glass man reached a transparent finger out to his dish again. ‘You’ve had quite enough! You know you can’t digest human food. Do you want me to have to take you back to that physician who almost broke your nose off last time?’

‘Eating sand all the time is so boring!’ complained the glass man, withdrawing his finger with an injured air. ‘And the sand you bring me isn’t particularly tasty either.’

‘You ungrateful creature!’ thundered Fenoglio. ‘When I go down to the river for it specially! And last time the river-nymphs thought it would be fun to pull me in. I nearly drowned, all because of you.’

The glass man seemed unimpressed. Still looking injured, he sat down beside the jug full of quills, closed his eyes, and

pretended to be asleep.

‘Two of them have already died on me that way!’ Fenoglio whispered to Meggie. ‘They just can’t resist our food. Stupid creatures.’

But Meggie was only half listening. She sat down on the bed with the parchment and read through it all again, word by word. Rain came in through the window, as if to remind her of another night – the night when she first heard of Fenoglio’s book, and saw Dustfinger standing outside in the rain. Dustfinger had looked happy in the castle courtyard. Fenoglio was happy too, and Farid, and Minerva and her children. And it must stay that way. I’ll read this for all of them, thought Meggie. For the strolling players, so that the Adderhead won’t hang them just for singing a song, for the peasants in the market place whose vegetables were trampled by those horses. What about Her Ugliness? Would it make Violante happy to have a husband again? Would she notice that this was a different Cosimo? But the words would come too late for the Prince of Sighs. He would never hear of his son’s return.

‘Well, say something!’ Fenoglio’s voice sounded unsure of itself. ‘Don’t you like it?’

‘Oh, yes. Yes, I do. It’s lovely.’

Relief spread over his face. ‘Then what are you waiting for?’

‘About the mark on her face – oh, I don’t know – it sounds like magic, like an inkspell.’

‘Oh, come on. I think it’s romantic, and that never hurts.’

‘If you say so. It’s your story.’ Meggie shrugged her shoulders. ‘But there’s one more thing. Who’s going to disappear when he arrives?’

Fenoglio went pale. ‘Heavens, I’d entirely forgotten about that. Rosenquartz, go and hide in your nest!’ he told the glass man. ‘Luckily the fairies are out.’

‘That’s no use,’ said Meggie quietly, as the glass man made his way up to the empty fairies’ nest, where he used to sulk and sometimes sleep. ‘Hiding is no use at all.’

The sound of a horse’s hooves rose to them from the street outside. One of the men-at-arms was riding by. Obviously the Piper wasn’t going to let the people of Ombra forget who their new master truly was, even in their sleep.

‘Well, there’s a sign for us!’ Fenoglio whispered to Meggie. ‘If that man disappears, he’s no loss. Anyway, how do you know anyone will disappear at all? I think it happens only if you read someone here who leaves a gap to be filled in his own story. But our new Cosimo has no story of his own! He was born here, today, from these words!’

Well, he might be right.

The clatter of the hooves mingled with the sound of Meggie’s voice. ‘*It was a quiet night in Ombra, very quiet,*’ she read. ‘*The wounds inflicted by the men-at-arms had not yet healed, and many never would.*’ And suddenly she forgot about the fear she had felt in the morning, and again thought only of her anger. She had felt so angry with men who encased themselves in armour and kicked women and children in the back with their iron shoes. The anger made her voice strong and full, ready to awaken new life. ‘*Doors and shutters were bolted, and behind them the children cried, as quietly as if fear itself kept their mouths shut, while their parents peered out into the night, fearfully wondering how dark the future would be under their new master. But suddenly hoofbeats echoed down the alley where the cobblers and saddlers lived*’ – how easily the words came now! They flowed over Meggie’s tongue as if they had been just waiting to be read aloud, to be brought to life this very night. ‘*People hurried to their windows. They looked out in fear, expecting to see one of the men-at-arms or even the Piper himself with his silver nose, but someone else came riding up to the castle, and the sight of him, familiar as it was, yet turned their faces pale. For the new arrival*

who came riding through sleepless Ombra bore the face of their dead prince, Cosimo the Fair, who had been resting in his crypt so long.

His likeness rode down the street on a white horse, and he was as handsome as all the songs about the fair Cosimo said. He rode through the castle gateway with the Adderhead's banner flying above it, reined in his horse in the quiet nocturnal courtyard, and for all who saw him there in the moonlight, sitting erect on his white horse, it was as if Cosimo had never been away. Then all the weeping was over, the weeping and the fear. The people of Ombra rejoiced, and others came from the most remote villages to see the man who bore a dead prince's face, and they whispered, "Cosimo is back. Cosimo the Fair has come back to take his father's place and protect Ombra from the Adderhead."

And so it was. The saviour of the city ascended the throne, and the birthmark on Her Ugliness's face faded. Cosimo the Fair had his father's court poet summoned, and asked his advice, for he had been told how wise a man he was, and now a great new age began.'

Meggie lowered the parchment. *A great new age ...*

Fenoglio hurried to the window. Meggie had heard the sound too – hoofbeats – but she did not rise to her feet.

'That must be him!' whispered Fenoglio. 'He's coming, oh, Meggie, he's coming! Listen!'

But Meggie still sat there looking at the written words on her lap. It seemed to her that they were breathing. Paper made flesh, ink made blood ... suddenly she was tired, so tired that it seemed much too far to walk to the window. She felt like a child who had climbed down into the cellar all alone, and now felt scared. If only Mo were here ...

'Any moment now! He'll be riding by any moment now!' Fenoglio leaned so far out of the window that he was in danger of falling head first into the alley. At least *he* was still here – he hadn't disappeared the way he did when she summoned the Shadow. But where else would he have gone, Meggie wondered? There seemed to be only one story left, this story,

Fenoglio's story. And it seemed to have no beginning and no end.

'Come on, Meggie!' In great excitement, he beckoned her over. 'You read it wonderfully, oh yes, wonderfully well! But I suppose you know that. Some of the phrases weren't among the best I've ever written, it was a little clumsy here and there, a little more dramatic colour wouldn't have hurt, but never mind, it worked! It definitely worked!'

There was a knock.

A knock on the door. Rosenquartz peered out of his nest, his face anxious, and Fenoglio turned, both alarmed and annoyed.

'Meggie?' whispered a voice. 'Are you there, Meggie?'

It was Farid.

'What does he want here?' Fenoglio uttered a less than delicate curse. 'Send him away. We really can't do with having him around just now. Oh – oh, look! Here he comes! Meggie, you're an enchantress!'

The hoofbeats were louder now. But Meggie did not go to the window; she walked to the door instead. Farid was standing outside, his face downcast. He looked almost as if he'd been crying. 'It's Gwin, Meggie ... Gwin's back,' he stammered. 'I don't know how he found me! I even threw stones to make him go away.'

'Meggie!' Fenoglio's voice sounded worse than merely irritated. 'Where are you?'

Without a word, she took Farid's hand and drew him over to the window with her.

A white horse was coming up the narrow alley. Its rider had black hair, and his face was as young and handsome as the face of the statues in the castle, but his eyes were not stony white; instead, they were bright and as dark as his hair. He was looking around as if he had just woken from a dream, and one that didn't entirely fit in with what he now saw.

‘Cosimo!’ whispered Farid, bewildered. ‘The dead Cosimo.’

‘Not exactly,’ Fenoglio whispered back. ‘First, he isn’t dead, as you can see for yourself, and second, he’s not *that* Cosimo. He’s a new one, a brand-new one, and Meggie and I have made him between us. Of course no one else will notice.’

‘Not even his wife?’

‘Well, maybe she will! But who cares about that? She hardly ever leaves the castle.’

Cosimo reined in his horse barely a metre from Minerva’s house. Instinctively, Meggie stepped back from the window. ‘What about him?’ she whispered. ‘Who does he himself think he is?’

‘What a question! He thinks he’s Cosimo, of course!’ replied Fenoglio impatiently. ‘Don’t get me confused, for heaven’s sake! All we’ve done is make sure the story goes on the way I originally planned it, no more and no less!’

Cosimo turned in his saddle and stared back down the street the way he had come – as if he had lost something, but had forgotten what it was. Then he clicked his tongue softly and urged his horse on, past Minerva’s husband’s workshop and the narrow house where the physician lived. Fenoglio often complained of the man’s lack of skill in pulling teeth.

‘That’s not a good idea.’ Farid retreated from the window as if the Devil himself had gone riding by. ‘It’s bad luck to summon the dead.’

‘He never *was* dead, damn it all!’ snapped Fenoglio. ‘How often do I have to explain? He was born this very day, from my words and Meggie’s voice, so don’t talk such nonsense. What are you doing here anyway? Since when do people come visiting decent girls in the middle of the night?’

Farid’s face flushed dark red. Then he turned without a word and went to the door.

‘Leave him alone! He can visit me whenever he likes!’ Meggie told Fenoglio sharply. The stairs were slippery with rain, and she didn’t catch up with Farid until he had reached the last step. He looked so sad.

‘What did you tell Dustfinger? Did you tell him how Gwin followed us?’

‘No, I didn’t dare.’ Farid leaned against the wall of the house and closed his eyes. ‘You should have seen his face when he saw the marten. Do you think he’ll have to die now, Meggie?’

She put out her hand and touched his face. He really had been crying. She could feel the dried tears on his skin.

‘That’s what Cheesehead said!’ She could hardly make out the words he was whispering. ‘He said I’d bring him bad luck.’

‘What are you talking about? Dustfinger should be glad to have you!’

Farid looked up at the sky. Rain was still falling. ‘I must go back,’ he said. ‘That’s why I came. To tell you I must stay with him now. I have to look after him – do you understand? If I keep close by him, then nothing bad will happen. You can visit me, though, at Roxane’s farm! We’re there most of the time. Dustfinger is crazy about her, he hardly ever leaves her side. Roxane this, Roxane that ...’ There was no mistaking the jealousy in his voice.

Meggie knew how he felt. She still clearly remembered those first few weeks back at Elinor’s house, and her troubled heart when Mo spent hours going for walks with Resa, and didn’t even ask if she would like to come too. She remembered what it felt like to stand outside a closed door and hear her father’s laughter on the other side, laughter meant not for her but for her mother. ‘Why do you look like that?’ Elinor had asked once, when she found Meggie watching the two of them in the garden. ‘Half his heart still belongs to you. Isn’t that enough?’ She had felt so ashamed. At least Farid was only jealous of a stranger. She’d been jealous of her own mother.

‘Please, Meggie! I must stay with him. Who else is going to look after him? Roxane? She doesn’t know anything about the marten, and anyway ...’

Meggie turned her head away so that he wouldn’t see her disappointment. Bother Gwin! She traced small circles on the damp ground with her toe.

‘You will come, won’t you?’ Farid took her hands. ‘There are wonderful plants growing in Roxane’s fields, and she has a goose who thinks she’s a watchdog, and an old horse. Jehan, that’s her son, says there’s a linchetto living in the stable, don’t ask me what a linchetto is, but Jehan says if you fart at it, it runs away. Well, Jehan’s still just a baby, but I think you’d like him ...’

‘Is he Dustfinger’s son?’ Meggie tucked her hair back behind her ear and tried to smile.

‘No, but guess what? Roxane thinks I am. Imagine that! Please, Meggie! Come to Roxane’s, do!’ He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her full on her mouth. His skin was wet with rain. When she didn’t pull away, he took her face between his hands and kissed her again, on her forehead, on her nose, on her mouth once more. ‘You will come, won’t you? Promise!’ he whispered.

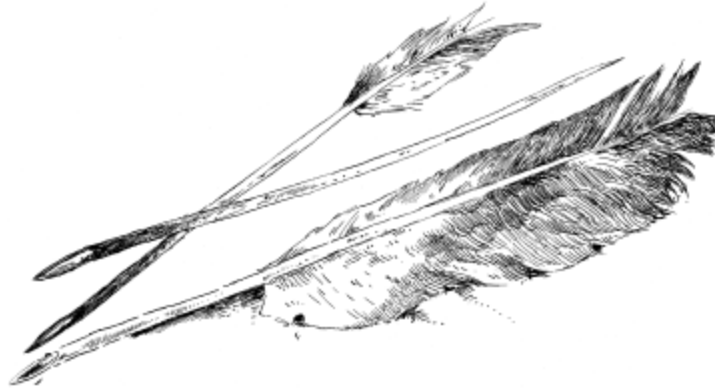
Then he ran away, fleet-footed as always, ever since the day Meggie had first set eyes on him. ‘You must come!’ he called back to her once more, before disappearing into the dark passage leading out to the street. ‘Maybe you’d better stay with us for a while – Dustfinger and me, I mean! That old man is crazy. You don’t go playing games with the dead!’

Then he had gone, and Meggie was leaning against the wall of Minerva’s house, where Farid had been standing a moment ago. She passed her fingers over her mouth, as if she must make sure that Farid’s kiss had not changed it in some way.

‘Meggie?’ Fenoglio was standing at the top of the stairs, a lantern in his hand. ‘What are you doing down there? Has the

boy gone? What did he want? Standing around in the dark there with you!’

Meggie did not reply. She didn’t want to talk to anyone. She just wanted to listen to what her bewildered heart was telling her.



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Elinor

Out in the world not much happened. But here in the special night, a land bricked with paper and leather, anything might happen, always did.

**Ray Bradbury,
*Something Wicked This Way Comes***

Elinor spent a couple of miserable days and nights in her cellar. The man built like a wardrobe brought them something to eat morning and evening – at least, they assumed it was morning and evening, always supposing that Darius’s watch was still keeping time. When the bulky figure first appeared with bread and a plastic bottle of water, she had thrown the bottle at his head. Or rather, she’d tried to, but the colossus ducked just in time and the bottle burst against the wall.

‘Never again, Darius!’ Elinor whispered when the wardrobe-man, grunting contemptuously, had locked them in once more. ‘I was never going to let myself be locked up again, that’s what I swore back in that stinking cage, when those arsonists walked past the bars with their rifles and flicked burning cigarette ends in my face. And now here I am locked up in my own cellar!’

On the first night she got up from the air mattress, which made all her bones ache, and threw cans of food against the

wall. Darius just crouched there on the blanket he had spread out over the cushion for the garden bench, looking at her wide-eyed. By the afternoon of the second day – or was it the third? – Elinor was breaking jars, sobbing when she cut her fingers on the glass. Darius was just sweeping up the broken pieces when the wardrobe-man came to fetch her. Darius tried to follow, but the wardrobe-man pushed his thin chest so roughly that he stumbled and fell among the olives, preserved tomatoes, and all the other things that had spilled out of the jars when Elinor smashed them.

‘Bastard!’ she snapped at the colossus, but he just grinned, pleased as a child who has knocked down a tower of building bricks, and hummed to himself as he led Elinor to her library. Who says bad people can’t be happy too? she thought as he opened the door and jerked his head, indicating that she should go in.

Her library was a shocking sight. There were dirty mugs and plates strewn around everywhere – on the window-sill, on the carpet, even on the glass cases containing her greatest treasures – and that wasn’t the worst of it. Her books were the worst. Hardly any of them were still in their right places. They were stacked on the floor among the unwashed coffee mugs, they were scattered in front of the windows. Many even lay flat on the floor open, their spines upward. Elinor couldn’t bear to look! Didn’t the monster know that was the way to break a book’s neck?

If he did, it didn’t bother him. Orpheus was sitting in her favourite armchair, his dreadful dog beside him holding something between its paws that looked suspiciously like one of her gardening shoes. Its master had draped his plump legs over one arm of the chair, and was holding a beautifully illustrated book about fairies that Elinor had bought in an auction only two months ago, paying such a high price that it had made Darius bury his head in his hands.

‘That,’ she said, her voice trembling slightly, ‘that is a very, very valuable book.’

Orpheus turned his head to her and smiled. It was the smile of a naughty boy. ‘I know!’ he said in his velvety voice. ‘You have very, very many valuable books, Signora Loredan.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ replied Elinor icily. ‘That’s why I don’t stack them any old how, like egg-boxes or slices of cheese. Each has its own place.’

This observation only made Orpheus smile even more broadly. He closed the book, after dog-earing one of the pages. Elinor drew in her breath sharply.

‘Books aren’t glass vases, dear lady,’ said Orpheus as he sat up in the chair. ‘They’re not as fragile or as decorative. They’re just books! It’s their contents that matter, and their contents won’t fall out if you stack them in a pile.’ He ran his hand over his smooth hair, as if afraid his parting might have slipped. ‘Sugar says you wanted to speak to me?’

Elinor cast an incredulous glance at the wardrobe-man. ‘Sugar?’

The giant smiled, revealing such an extraordinary collection of bad teeth that Elinor didn’t have to wonder how he got his nickname.

‘I certainly do. I’ve been wanting to speak to you for days. I insist on being let out of the cellar – and my librarian, too! I’m sick of having to pee in a bucket in my own house, and not knowing whether it’s day or night. I order you to bring my niece and her husband back. They’re in the greatest danger, and it’s all your fault, and I order you to keep your fat fingers off my books, damn it!’

Elinor shut her mouth – and cursed herself with every curse she could call to mind. Oh no! What was Darius always telling her? What had she told herself hundreds of times, lying down there on that horrible air mattress? Control yourself, Elinor, be

cunning, Elinor, watch your tongue – all useless. She had burst like a balloon blown up too far.

But Orpheus still sat there, with his legs crossed and that impudent smile on his face. ‘I could probably bring them back. Yes, probably!’ he said, patting his dog’s ugly head. ‘But why should I?’ His fat fingers stroked the cover of the book he had just so cruelly dog-eared. ‘A handsome cover, isn’t it? Rather sentimental, perhaps, and I don’t think of fairies quite like that, but all the same ...’

‘Yes, yes, I know it’s handsome, but I’m not interested in the cover just now!’ Elinor was trying not to raise her voice, but she simply couldn’t keep it down. ‘If you can really bring them back, then for heaven’s sake get a move on and do it! Before it’s too late. The old woman is going to kill him, didn’t you hear her? She’s going to kill Mortimer!’

His expression indifferent, Orpheus straightened his crumpled tie. ‘Well, *he* killed Mortola’s son, as far as I can make out. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, as another – not entirely unknown – book so forcibly puts it.’

‘Her son was a murderer!’ Elinor clenched her fists. She wanted to rush at the moon-face and snatch her book from his hands, hands that looked as soft and white as if they had never in their life done anything but turn the pages of a book. However, Sugar barred her way.

‘Yes, yes, I know.’ Orpheus heaved a heavy sigh. ‘I know all about Capricorn. I’ve read the book telling his story more times than I can count, and I have to say he was a very good villain, one of the best I ever met in the realm of the written word. Just killing someone like that – well, if you ask me, it’s almost a crime. Although I’m glad of it for Dustfinger.’

Oh, if only she could have hit him just once, on his broad nose, on his smiling mouth!

‘Capricorn had Mortimer abducted! He captured his daughter and kept his wife a prisoner for years on end!’ Tears of rage and

helplessness came into Elinor's eyes. 'Please, Mr Orpheus or whatever your real name is!' She put all her strength and self-control into sounding reasonably friendly. 'Please! Bring them back, and while you're at it please bring Meggie back too, before she gets trodden on by a giant or impaled on a spear in that story.'

Orpheus leaned back and looked at her as if she were a picture on an easel. How naturally he had taken over her armchair – as if Elinor herself had never sat there with Meggie beside her, or with Resa on her lap when she was still tiny, so many years ago. Elinor bit back her fury. Control yourself, Elinor, she thought, as she kept her eyes fixed on Orpheus's pale, bespectacled face. Control yourself! For the sake of Mortimer, and Resa, and Meggie!

Orpheus cleared his throat. 'I don't know what's bothering you,' he said, examining his fingernails, which were bitten like a schoolboy's. 'I envy all three of them!'

It was a moment before Elinor realized what he was talking about. Only when he went on did it become clear.

'What makes you think they want to come back?' he asked softly. 'If I were there I never would! There's nowhere in this world I've ever wanted to be half as much as on the hill where the Laughing Prince's castle lies. I've walked through Ombra market countless times, I've looked up at the towers and the banners with the lion emblem. I've imagined what it would be like to wander through the Wayless Wood and watch Dustfinger stealing honey from the fire-elves. I've pictured the minstrel woman he loves, Roxane. I've stood in Capricorn's fortress smelling the potions that Mortola brewed from monks-hood and hemlock. The Adderhead's castle often figures in my dreams, even today. Sometimes I'm in one of its dungeons, sometimes I'm stealing in through the gate with Dustfinger and looking up at the heads of minstrels set there on pikes by the Adderhead for singing the wrong song ... By all the words and letters in the world, when Mortola told me her name I thought she was

crazy! Yes, she and Basta did look like the characters they claimed to be, but could it really be true that someone had brought them here out of my favourite book? Were there other people who could read aloud the way I can? I didn't believe it until Dustfinger came up to me in that musty, ramshackle library. Oh, God, how my heart beat when I saw his face with the three pale scars left by Basta's knife! It beat faster than on the day I first kissed a girl. It really was him, the melancholy hero of my very favourite book. And I helped him to disappear into it again, but what about me? Hopeless.' He laughed, a sad and bitter laugh. 'I just hope he doesn't have to die the death that idiot of an author intended for him. No, he can't! He'll be all right, I'm sure he will. After all, Capricorn is dead and Basta's a coward. Do you know, I wrote to that Fenoglio, the author, when I was twelve, telling him he must change his story, or at least write a sequel in which Dustfinger comes back? He never answered my letter, any more than *Inkheart* ever had a sequel. Oh well,' Orpheus sighed deeply.

Dustfinger, Dustfinger ... Elinor compressed her lips. Who cared what happened to the matchstick-eater? Keep calm, Elinor, don't go off the deep end again, you must be clever now, clever, go carefully ... Easier said than done.

'Listen, if you'd like to be in that book so much –' and this time she really did manage to make her voice sound as if what she was saying didn't matter all that much to her – 'then why not just bring Meggie back? She knows how you can read yourself into a story. She's done it! I'm sure she can tell you how to do it, or read you over there too.'

Orpheus's round face darkened so suddenly that Elinor immediately knew she had made a bad mistake. How could she have forgotten what a vain, conceited creature he was?

'No one,' said Orpheus softly, rising slowly and menacingly from her chair, 'no one can tell me anything about the art of reading. Certainly not a little girl!'

Now he'll put you straight back in the cellar, thought Elinor. What am I going to do? Think, Elinor, try to find the right answer in your silly head! Do something! Surely you can think something up! 'Oh, of course not!' she stammered. 'No one but you could have read Dustfinger back. No one. But—'

'No buts. You watch out.' Orpheus posed as if he were about to sing an aria on stage, and picked up the book lying on the chair where he had so carelessly put it down. He opened it right where the dog-ear disfigured the creamy white page, ran the tip of his tongue over his lips as if he had to smooth them so that the words would flow freely – and then his voice filled Elinor's library again, the captivating voice that did not suit his outward appearance in the least. Orpheus read as if he were letting his favourite food melt in his mouth, relishing it, greedy for the sound of the letters, pearls melting on his tongue, words like seeds from which he was making life emerge.

Perhaps he really was the greatest master ever of his art. He certainly practised it with the utmost passion.

'There is a tale of a certain shepherd, Tudur of Llangollen, who came across a troop of faeries, dancing to the tune of a tiny fiddler.' A faint chirping sound arose behind Elinor, but when she turned round there was no one to be seen but Sugar, listening to Orpheus's voice with a bewildered expression on his face. 'Tudur tried to resist the enchanting strains, but finally, throwing his cap in the air and shouting: "Now for it, then, play away, old devil!" he joined in.'

The fiddling grew shriller and shriller, and when Elinor turned round this time she saw a man standing in her library, surrounded by small creatures dressed in leaves and prancing about on his bare feet like a dancing bear, while a step or so away a tiny little thing with a bellflower on its head was playing a fiddle hardly larger than an acorn.

'Immediately, a pair of horns appeared on the fiddler's head and a tail sprouted from beneath his coat!' Orpheus let his voice

swell until he was almost singing. ‘The dancing sprites turned into goats, dogs, cats and foxes, and they and Tudur spun around in a dizzying frenzy.’

Elinor pressed her hands to her mouth. There they were, emerging from behind the armchair, leaping over the stacks of books, dancing on the open pages with their muddy hooves. The dog jumped up and barked at them.

‘Stop it!’ Elinor cried to Orpheus. ‘Stop it at once!’

He closed the book with a triumphant smile.

‘Chase them out into the garden!’ he told Sugar, who was standing there transfixed. Confused, the man groped his way over to the door, opened it – and let the whole troop dance past him, fiddling, screeching, barking, bleating, on down Elinor’s corridor and past her bedroom, until the noise gradually died away.

‘No one,’ repeated Orpheus, and now there was not the smallest trace of a smile to be seen on his round face, ‘no one can teach Orpheus anything about the art of reading. And did you notice? Nothing disappeared! Maybe a few bookworms if there are any in your library, maybe a couple of flies ...’

‘Maybe a couple of motorists down on the road,’ added Elinor in a hoarse voice, but unfortunately there was no hiding the fact that she was impressed.

‘Maybe!’ said Orpheus, carelessly shrugging his round shoulders. ‘But that wouldn’t make any difference to my mastery, would it? And now I hope *you* understand something about the art of cooking, because I’m sick and tired of what Sugar serves up. And I’m hungry. I’m always hungry when I’ve been reading aloud.’

‘Cooking?’ Elinor practically choked on her rage. ‘You expect me to act as your cook in my own house?’

‘Well, of course. Make yourself useful. Or do you want to give Sugar the idea that you and your stammering friend are

superfluous to requirements? He's in a bad mood anyway, because he hasn't yet found anything worth stealing in your house. No, we really don't want to put any stupid notions into his head, do we?'

Elinor took a deep breath and tried to control her trembling knees. 'No. No, we don't,' she said, turned – and went into the kitchen.

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The Wrong Man

So she placed the healing herb
In his mouth – he slept straightway.
She covered him most carefully.
He still slept on the livelong day.

Wolfram von Eschenbach,
Parsifal

Resa and Mo were alone in the cave when they came in: two women and four men. Two of the men had been sitting by the fire with Cloud-Dancer: Sootbird the fire-eater and Twofingers. His face was no friendlier by daylight, and the others too were looking so hostile that Resa instinctively moved closer to Mo. Only Sootbird seemed to feel awkward.

Mo was asleep. He had slept this uneasy, fevered sleep for more than a day now, and it made Nettle shake her head anxiously. The six strolling players stopped only a few paces away from him. They loomed between Resa and the daylight coming in from outside. One of the women stepped out in front of the rest of them. She wasn't particularly old, but her fingers were crooked like a bird's claws.

'He must go!' she said. 'Today. He's not one of us, and nor are you.'

‘What do you mean?’ Hard as Resa was trying to sound calm, her voice shook. ‘He can’t go anywhere. He’s still too weak.’

If only Nettle had been there! But she had gone away muttering something about sick children – and the root of a herb that might perhaps cure Mo’s fever. The six would have felt afraid of Nettle, they’d have been respectful and timid, but to the strolling players Resa was only a stranger, a desperate stranger with a mortally sick husband – even if none of them guessed just *how* much of a stranger she was in this world.

‘It’s the children ... you must see how we feel!’ The other woman was still very young, and she was pregnant. She placed one protective hand on her belly. ‘A man like him puts our children in danger, and Martha’s right, you don’t even belong to us. This is the only place where they let us stay. No one drives us away, but once they hear the Bluejay is here, that will be over. They’ll say we were hiding him.’

‘But he isn’t this Bluejay! I told you so before. And who do you mean by “they”?’

Mo whispered something in his fever, his hand clutching Resa’s arm. She soothingly stroked his forehead and forced a little of the decoction that Nettle had made between his lips. Her visitors watched in silence.

‘As if you didn’t know!’ said one of them, a tall, thin man shaken by a dry cough. ‘The Adderhead’s looking for him. He’ll send his men-at-arms here. He’ll have us all hung for hiding him.’

‘I’m telling you again!’ Resa took Mo’s hand and held it very tight. ‘He’s not a robber, or anyone else out of your stories! We’ve only been here a few days! My husband is a bookbinder, that’s his trade, he isn’t anything else!’

The way they were looking at her!

‘I’ve seldom heard a worse lie!’ The two-fingered man’s mouth twisted. He had an unpleasant voice. Judging by his brightly patterned clothing, he was one of the players who put

on comic shows in market places, loud, coarse farces to make the spectators laugh all their troubles away. ‘What would a bookbinder be doing in Capricorn’s old fortress in the middle of the Wayless Wood? People never go there of their own free will, what with the White Women and the other horrors haunting the ruins. And why would Mortola bother with a bookbinder? Why would she shoot him with some witchy weapon no one’s ever heard of before?’

The others nodded agreement – and took another step towards Mo. What was she to do? What could she say? What use was it having a voice if no one would listen to her? ‘Don’t let it worry you, not being able to speak,’ Dustfinger had often told her. ‘People tend not to listen anyway, right?’

Perhaps she could call for help, but who was going to come? Cloud-Dancer had set off early in the morning with Nettle, when the leaves had still been tinged red by the light of the rising sun, and the women who brought Resa food and sometimes kept watch beside Mo for her, to let her get a few hours’ sleep, had gone down to the nearby river with the children. There were only a few old men outside the cave, and they had come here because they were tired of other people and were waiting to die. They weren’t likely to help her.

‘We won’t hand him over to the Adderhead, we’ll just take him back to where Nettle found you. To that accursed fortress.’ It was the man with the cough again. He had a raven sitting on his shoulder. Resa knew such ravens from the days when she had sat in market places writing documents and petitions – their owners trained them to steal a few extra coins while they were performing their own tricks.

‘The songs say that the Bluejay protects the Motley Folk,’ the raven’s owner went on. ‘And those he’s supposed to have killed threatened our women and children. We appreciate that, we’ve all sung the songs about him, but we’re not ready to be strung up for his sake.’

They'd made up their minds long ago. They were going to take Mo away. Resa wanted to shout at them, but she simply had no strength left for shouting. 'It will kill him if you take him back there!' Her voice was hardly louder than a whisper.

They didn't care about that; Resa saw it in their eyes. Why should they, she thought. What would she do if the children out there were hers? She remembered a visit that the Adderhead had paid to Capricorn's fortress, to see an enemy of theirs executed. Since that day she had known what someone who enjoyed inflicting pain on others looked like.

Before Resa could stop her, the woman with the claw-like fingers knelt down beside Mo and pushed his sleeve up. 'There, see that?' she said triumphantly. 'He has the scar, just as the songs describe it – where the Adder's dogs bit him.'

Resa hauled her away so violently that the woman fell at her companions' feet. 'Those dogs weren't the Adderhead's. They belonged to Basta!'

The name made them start nervously, but all the same they didn't leave. Sootbird helped the woman to her feet, and Twofingers went closer to Mo. 'Come on!' he told the others. 'Let's pick him up.'

They all joined him; only the fire-eater hesitated.

'Oh please, believe me!' Resa pushed their hands away. 'How can you think I'd lie to you? What thanks would that be for all your help?'

No one took any notice of her. Twofingers pulled away the blanket that Nettle had given them to cover Mo. It was cold in the cave at night.

'Well, fancy that! Visiting our guests. How kind of you.'

How they spun round! Like naughty children caught in the act. A man was standing in the entrance to the cave. For a moment Resa thought it was Dustfinger and wondered, in bewilderment, how Cloud-Dancer could possibly have brought

him so quickly. But then she saw that the man the six of them were staring at so guiltily was black. Everything about him was black: his long hair, his skin, his eyes, even his clothes. And beside him, almost a head taller, stood a bear as black as his master.

‘These must be the visitors Nettle told me about, I expect?’ The bear ducked his head, grunting, as he followed the man into the cave. ‘She says they know an old friend of mine, a very good friend. Dustfinger. Of course, you’ve all heard of him, haven’t you? And I’m sure you know that his friends have always been my friends too. The same applies to his enemies, of course.’

The six moved aside with some haste, as if to give the stranger a better view of Resa. The fire-eater laughed nervously. ‘Why, what are you doing here, Prince?’

‘Oh, this and that. Why are there no guards outside? Do you think the brownies have lost their taste for our provisions?’ He walked slowly towards them. His bear dropped to all fours and lumbered after him, puffing and snorting, as if he didn’t like the cramped cave.

Prince! They called him ‘Prince’. Of course. The Black Prince! Fenoglio’s book had told Resa his story, and she had heard his name in Ombra market too, from the maids in Capricorn’s fortress, even from Capricorn’s men. Yet she had never seen him face to face. When Fenoglio’s story had first swallowed her up he had been a knife-thrower, a bear-tamer ... and Dustfinger’s friend since the two of them had been barely half as old as Meggie was now.

The others drew aside as he stepped up to them with his bear, but the Prince ignored them. He looked down at Resa. There were three knives in his brightly embroidered belt: slender, shiny knives, although no strolling player was allowed to carry weapons. ‘That’s to make it easier to skewer them,’ Dustfinger had often said mockingly.

‘Welcome to the Secret Camp,’ said the Black Prince, his glance going to Mo’s blood-stained bandages. ‘Dustfinger’s friends are always welcome here – even if it may not look like it just now.’ He looked ironically at the others standing around there. Only the two-fingered man defiantly returned his gaze, but then he too bent his head.

The Prince went on looking down at Resa. ‘Where did you meet Dustfinger?’

What was she to say? In another world? The bear was sniffing the bread lying beside her. His hot breath, the breath of a beast of prey, made her shudder. Tell the truth, Resa, she thought. You don’t have to say what world it happened in.

‘I worked as a maid for the fire-raisers for several years,’ she said. ‘I ran away, but a snake bit me. Dustfinger found me and helped me. I’d have died but for him.’ Yes, he hid me, she continued the story in her mind, but Basta and the others soon found me, and they half killed Dustfinger.

‘What about your husband? I hear he’s not one of us.’ The black eyes explored her face. They seemed to be well versed in detecting lies.

‘She says he’s a bookbinder, but we know better!’ The two-fingered man spat out his words contemptuously.

‘So what do you know?’ The Prince looked at them, and they fell silent.

‘He *is* a bookbinder! Give him paper, glue and leather, and once he’s better he’ll show you.’ Don’t cry, Resa, she told herself. You’ve cried quite enough these last few days.

The thin man coughed again.

‘Very well, you heard her.’ The Prince crouched down beside her on the ground. ‘These two stay here until Dustfinger arrives to confirm their story. He’ll soon tell us if this is only a harmless bookbinder or that robber you’re always going on about. Dustfinger knows your husband too, doesn’t he?’

‘Oh yes,’ replied Resa softly. ‘He’s known him longer than he’s known me.’

Mo turned his head, and whispered Meggie’s name.

‘Meggie? Is that your name?’ The Prince pushed the bear’s muzzle away as the animal sniffed the bread again.

‘It’s our daughter’s name.’

‘You have a daughter? How old is she?’ The bear rolled on his back for his belly to be scratched, as if he were a dog.

‘Thirteen.’

‘Thirteen? Almost the same age as Dustfinger’s daughter.’

Dustfinger’s daughter? He’d never said anything to her about any daughter.

‘So why are you all still standing around?’ the Prince snapped at the others. ‘Bring fresh water! Can’t you see he’s feverish?’

The two women hurried away, relieved, or so it seemed to Resa, to have a good reason to leave the cave. But the men stood around indecisively.

‘Suppose it really *is* him, though, Prince?’ asked the thin man. ‘And suppose the Adderhead hears about him before Dustfinger gets here?’ He coughed so hard that he had to press his hand to his chest.

‘Suppose he’s who? The Bluejay? Nonsense! There’s probably no such man, and even if there is, since when have we given up people who are on our own side? And suppose the songs are true, and he’s protected your women and your children ...’

‘Songs are never true.’ The two-fingered man’s eyebrows were as dark as if he had blackened them with soot. ‘He’s probably no better than any other highwayman, a murderer greedy for gold, nothing more ...’

‘Perhaps, or perhaps not,’ retorted the Prince. ‘I see only an injured man and a woman asking for our help.’

The men did not reply, but the glances they cast Mo were still hostile.

‘Now get out, and hurry up about it!’ the Prince said angrily. ‘How’s he to get better with you staring at him like that? Or do you think his wife likes your ugly mugs? Go and make yourselves useful, there’s plenty of work outside.’

And they did go, sullenly slouching away like men who had not done what they came to do.

‘He isn’t the Bluejay!’ Resa whispered, when they had left.

‘Very likely not!’ The Prince stroked his bear’s round ears. ‘But I’m afraid our friends out there are convinced he is. And the Adder has put a high price on the Bluejay’s head.’

‘A high price?’ Resa looked at the entrance to the cave. Two of the men were still standing there. ‘They’ll come back,’ she whispered, ‘and try to take him away after all.’

But the Black Prince shook his head.

‘Not while I’m here. And I’ll stay until Dustfinger arrives. Nettle said you’d sent him a message, so I expect he’ll soon be here to tell them you’re not lying, won’t he?’

The women came back with a basin of water. Resa dipped a scrap of fabric in it to cool Mo’s brow. The pregnant woman leaned over her and put a few dried flowers in her lap. ‘Here,’ she whispered. ‘Put this on his heart. It brings luck.’

Resa stroked the dried flower-heads. ‘They obey you,’ she said to the Prince, when the women had gone again. ‘Why?’

‘Oh, because they’ve chosen me as their leader,’ replied the Prince. ‘And because I’m a very good knife-thrower.’



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Fairydeath

The wind this evening, so eagerly playing
 Sounds like blades that someone is swinging –
 On the instrument of the trees densely growing ...

Montale,
Poems

At first Dustfinger didn't believe Farid when he told him what he had seen and heard in Fenoglio's room. Even the old man couldn't be crazy enough to meddle with Death's handiwork. But then, that same day, a couple of women buying herbs from Roxane had the same story to tell as the boy: Cosimo the Fair had come back, they said, back from the dead.

'Women say the White Women fell so deeply in love with him that at last they let him go,' said Roxane. 'And men say he'd just been hiding from his ugly wife for a while.'

Crazy stories, thought Dustfinger, but not half as crazy as the truth.

The women had nothing to say about Brianna. He didn't like to think of her up at the castle. No one knew what might happen there next. It seemed that the Piper was still in Ombra with half a dozen men-at-arms. Cosimo had sent the rest of them out of the city, and they were waiting outside the walls for their own lord's arrival. For there was a widespread rumour

that the Adderhead would come in person to see this prince who had risen from the dead. He wasn't going to accept the idea of Cosimo's taking the throne from his grandson again so easily.

'I'll ride to Ombra myself and see how she is,' said Roxane. 'They probably wouldn't even let you through the Outer Gate. But there's something else you can do for me.'

The women had not come just for the herbs and to pass on the gossip about Cosimo. They had brought Roxane an order from Nettle, who was in Ombra treating two sick children in the dyers' quarter. She needed a root of fairydeath, dangerous medicine which killed as often as it cured. The old woman hadn't said for what poor devil she needed the root. 'Just that it's a man at the Secret Camp who's injured, and Nettle is going back there this evening,' said Roxane. 'And another thing ... Cloud-Dancer was with her. It seems he's carrying a message for you.'

'A message? For me?'

'Yes, from a woman.' Roxane looked at him for a moment, and then went into the house to get the root.

'You're going to Ombra?' Farid was there behind Dustfinger so suddenly that he jumped.

'I am, and Roxane is riding to the castle,' he said. 'So you stay here to keep an eye on Jehan.'

'And who's going to keep an eye on you?'

'Me?'

'Yes.' What a look Farid was giving him! And the marten too. 'To stop it happening.' Farid spoke so softly that Dustfinger could hardly hear him. 'Stop what it says in the book.'

'Oh, that.' The boy was watching him as anxiously as if he might fall down dead any minute. Dustfinger had to suppress a smile, although it was his own death they were discussing. 'Did Meggie tell you about it?'

Farid nodded.

‘Very well. Forget it, do you hear me? The words are written. Maybe they’ll come true, maybe not.’

But Farid shook his head so vigorously that his black hair fell over his forehead. ‘No!’ he said. ‘No, they won’t come true! I swear it. I swear it by the djinns that howl in the desert and the ghosts that eat the dead, I swear it by everything I fear!’

Dustfinger looked thoughtfully at him. ‘You crazy boy!’ he said. ‘But I like your oath. We’d better leave Gwin here, then, and you can keep him!’

Gwin did not approve. He bit Dustfinger’s hand when he was put on his chain, snapped at his fingers, and chattered even more angrily when Jink got into his master’s rucksack.

‘You’re taking the new marten with you and the old one must be put on the chain?’ asked Roxane, when she came back to them with the root for Nettle.

‘Yes. Because someone said he’d bring me bad luck.’

‘Since when have you believed that kind of thing?’

Indeed, since when? Since I met an old man who claims to have made you and me up, thought Dustfinger. Gwin was still hissing; he had seldom seen the marten so angry. Without a word he took the chain off Gwin’s collar again. And ignored Farid’s look of alarm.

All the way to Ombra Gwin sat on Farid’s shoulders, as if to show Dustfinger that he hadn’t forgiven him yet. And the moment Jink put his nose out of the rucksack, Gwin bared his teeth and snarled so menacingly that Farid had to hold his muzzle shut a couple of times.

The gallows outside the city gates were empty; only a few ravens were perched on the wooden beams. Even though Cosimo was back, Her Ugliness was still administering justice in Ombra, just as she had done in his father’s lifetime, and she did

not think well of hangings – perhaps because, as a child, she had seen too many men dangling from a rope with their tongues blue and their faces bloated.

‘Listen,’ Dustfinger said to Farid as they stopped beneath the gallows, ‘while I take Nettle the root and ask Cloud-Dancer for the message I’m told he has for me, you go and find Meggie. I must talk to her.’

Farid went red, but he nodded. Dustfinger looked at his face with amusement. ‘What’s all this? Did something besides Cosimo’s return from the dead happen on the evening when you went to see her?’

‘None of your business!’ muttered Farid, blushing more deeply than ever.

A farmer, swearing profusely, was driving a cart laden with barrels towards the city gates. The oxen blocked the gateway, and the guards impatiently grabbed the reins. Dustfinger took this chance to get himself and Farid past them. ‘Bring Meggie here, all the same,’ he said as they parted on the other side of the gates. ‘And don’t get so lovesick you lose your way.’

He watched the boy until he had disappeared among the houses. No wonder Roxane thought Farid was his son. Sometimes he suspected his own heart of thinking the same.

Cloud-Dancer's Message

Yes, my love,
This world of ours bleeds
With more pain than just the pain of love.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz,
'The love I gave you once',
An Elusive Dawn

There could hardly be a worse smell in the world than the odour rising from the dyers' vats. The acrid stench rose to Dustfinger's nostrils even as he was making his way along the alley where the smiths plied their trade – tinkers mending pots and pans, blacksmiths shoeing horses, and on the other side of the road the armourers, who were considered superior to the other smiths and were arrogant as befitted their status. The sound of all the hammers beating on red-hot iron was almost as bad as the smell in the alley. The dyers had their hovels in the most remote part of Ombra; their stinking vats were never tolerated in the better parts of any town. But just as Dustfinger was approaching the gate separating their quarter from the rest of Ombra, a man coming out of an armourer's workshop collided with him.

The Piper. He was easily recognizable by his silver nose, although Dustfinger could remember the days when he had a

nose of flesh and blood. Just your luck again, Dustfinger, he told himself, turning his head aside and trying to slip past Capricorn's minstrel quickly. Of all the men in this world, that bloodhound has to cross your path. He was beginning to hope that the Piper hadn't noticed who he had bumped into, but just as he thought he was safely past him the silver-nosed man seized his arm and swung him round.

'Dustfinger!' he said in the strained voice that had once sounded so different. It had always reminded Dustfinger of over-sweet cakes. Capricorn had loved to listen to it more than any other voice, and the same was true of the songs it sang. The Piper wrote wonderful songs about fire-raising and murder, so wonderful that they almost made you believe there was no nobler occupation than cutting throats. Did he sing the same songs for the Adderhead – or were they too coarsegrained for the silver halls of the Castle of Night?

'Well, fancy that! I'm inclined to think just about everyone's coming back from the dead these days,' said the Piper, while the two men-at-arms with him looked covetously at the weapons displayed outside the armourers' workshops. 'I really thought Basta had sliced you up and then buried you years ago. Did you know he's back too? He and the old woman, Mortola. I'm sure you remember her. The Adderhead was delighted to welcome her to his castle. You know how highly he always thought of her deadly concoctions.'

Dustfinger hid the fear pervading his heart behind a smile. 'Why, if it isn't the Piper!' he said. 'Your new nose suits you much better than the old one. It tells everyone who your new master is, and shows that it belongs to a minstrel who can be bought for silver.'

The Piper's eyes had not changed. They were pale grey like the sky on a rainy day, and they stared at him with as fixed a gaze as the eyes of a bird. Dustfinger knew from Roxane how he had lost his nose, cut off by a man whose daughter he had seduced with his dark songs.

‘You always did have a dangerously sharp tongue, Dustfinger,’ he said. ‘It’s about time someone finally cut it out. Indeed, wasn’t that tried once, and you got away only because the Black Prince and his bear protected you? Are they still looking after you? I don’t see them anywhere.’ He looked around, his eye searching the scene.

Dustfinger cast a quick glance at the two men-at-arms. They were both at least a head taller than him. What would Farid say if he could see me now? he wondered. That I ought to have had him with me so that he could keep his vow? The Piper had a sword, of course, and his hand was already on the hilt. He obviously thought as little as the Black Prince did of the law forbidding strolling players to carry weapons. A good thing the smiths are hammering so loudly, thought Dustfinger, or no doubt everyone would hear my heart beating with fear.

‘I must be on my way,’ he said, as casually as possible. ‘Give Basta my regards when you see him, and as for burying me, he hasn’t done it yet.’ He turned – it was worth a try – but the Piper held his arm tightly.

‘Of course, and there’s your marten too!’ he hissed.

Dustfinger felt Jink’s damp muzzle against his ear. It’s the wrong marten, he thought, trying to calm his racing heart. The wrong marten. But had Fenoglio ever mentioned Gwin’s name when he staged Dustfinger’s death? With the best will in the world he couldn’t remember. I’ll have to ask Basta to give me the book back so that I can look it up, he thought bitterly. He signalled to Jink to get back into the rucksack. Better not think about that.

The Piper was still holding his arm. He wore pale leather gloves, finely stitched like a lady’s. ‘The Adderhead will soon be here,’ he told Dustfinger in an undertone. ‘He didn’t care at all for the news of his son-in-law’s strange return to life. He thinks the whole business is a wicked masquerade designed to cheat his defenceless grandson of the throne.’

Four guards came down the street wearing the Laughing Prince's colours: Cosimo's colours now. Dustfinger had never in his life been so glad to see armed men. The Piper let go of his arm.

'We'll meet again soon,' he hissed in his noseless voice.

'I dare say,' was all that Dustfinger replied. Then he quickly pushed between a couple of ragged boys standing there and staring wide-eyed at a sword, made his way past a woman showing her battered cooking pot to one of the smiths, and disappeared through the dyers' gate.

No one followed him. No one seized him and hauled him back. You have too many enemies, Dustfinger, he thought. He didn't slow down until he came to the tubs from which the vapours of the liquid muck used by the dyers rose. The same miasma hung over the stream that carried the stinking brew under the city wall and down to the river. No wonder the river-nymphs were found only above the place where it flowed into the main waterway.

In the second house Dustfinger tried, they told him where to find Nettle. The woman he had been sent to had eyes red with weeping, and was carrying a baby. Without a word, she beckoned him into her house, if a house it could be called. Nettle was bending over a little girl with red cheeks and glazed eyes. At the sight of Dustfinger she straightened up, looking grumpy.

'Roxane asked me to bring you this!'

She glanced briefly at the root, compressed her narrow lips, and nodded.

'What's wrong with the girl?' he asked. The child's mother had sat down by the bed again.

Nettle shrugged. She seemed to be wearing the same moss-green garment as she had did years ago – and obviously she still liked him as little as ever.

‘A high fever, but she’ll survive,’ she replied. ‘It’s not half as bad as the one that killed your daughter ... while her father was off jaunting around the world!’ She looked him in the face as she said that, as if to make sure that her words went home, but Dustfinger knew how to hide pain. He was almost as good at hiding pain as he was at playing with fire.

‘The root is dangerous,’ he said.

‘Do you think you have to tell me that?’ The old woman looked at him as if he had insulted her. ‘The wound it’s to heal is dangerous too. He’s a strong man or he’d be dead by now.’

‘Do I know him?’

‘You know his wife.’

What was the old woman talking about? Dustfinger glanced at the sick child. Her small face was flushed with fever.

‘I heard that Roxane’s let you back into her bed again,’ said Nettle. ‘You can tell her she’s more of a fool than I thought.’

And now go round behind the house. Cloud-Dancer’s there. He can tell you more about the other woman. She gave him a message for you.’

Cloud-Dancer was standing beside a stunted oleander bush that grew near the dyers’ huts.

‘That poor child, did you see her?’ he asked as Dustfinger came over to him. ‘I can’t bear to see them so sick. And the mothers ... you’d think they’d weep their eyes away. I remember how Roxane—’ But here he broke off abruptly. ‘Sorry,’ he murmured, putting his hand into the breast of his dirty tunic, ‘I was forgetting she was your child too. Here, this is for you.’ He brought out a note on fine, pure white paper such as Dustfinger had never seen in this world before. ‘A woman gave me this for you. Nettle found her and her husband in the forest, in Capricorn’s old fortress, and took them to the Secret Camp. The man’s wounded, quite badly.’

Hesitantly, Dustfinger unfolded the paper. He recognized the writing at once.

‘She says she knows you. I told her you can’t read, but—’

‘I can read now,’ Dustfinger interrupted him. ‘She taught me.’

How did she come to be here? That was all he could think of as Resa’s words danced before his eyes. The paper was so crumpled that it was difficult to decipher them. Not that reading had ever come easily to him ...

‘Yes, she said so too: “I taught him”, she told me.’ Cloud-Dancer looked at him curiously. ‘Where did you get to know the woman?’

‘It’s a long story.’ He put the note in his rucksack. ‘I must be off,’ he said.

‘We’re going back this evening, Nettle and I!’ Cloud-Dancer called after him. ‘Shall I tell the woman anything?’

‘Yes. Tell her I’ll bring her daughter to her.’

Cosimo’s soldiers were still standing in the smiths’ alley, assessing the merits of a sword, something an ordinary man-at-arms could never afford. There was no sign of the Piper. Brightly coloured strips of fabric hung from the windows: Ombra was celebrating the return of its dead prince, but Dustfinger was in no mood to celebrate. The words in his rucksack weighed heavily on him, even if he had to admit that it gave him bitter satisfaction to see that Silvertongue obviously had even less luck in this world than he, Dustfinger, had known in Silvertongue’s. Did he know what it felt like to be in the wrong story now? Or hadn’t he had time to feel anything before Mortola shot him?

People were thronging the street leading up to the castle as if it were market day. Dustfinger looked up at the towers, from which black banners still flew. What did his daughter think of the return of her mistress’s husband? Even if you were to ask Brianna, she wouldn’t tell you, he thought, turning back to the

gate. It was time to get out of here before he encountered the Piper again. Or even his master ...

Meggie was already waiting with Farid under the empty gallows. The boy whispered something to her, and she laughed. By fire and ashes, thought Dustfinger, see how happy those two look, and you have to be the bearer of bad news yet again! Why is it always you? Simple, he answered himself. Bad news suits your face better than good news.

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Ink-Medicine

The memory of my father is wrapped up in
White paper, like sandwiches taken for a day of work.
Just as a magician takes towers and rabbits
Out of his hat, he drew love from his small body.

Yehuda Amichai,
'My Father',
Isi Bongo 2

Meggie stopped laughing as soon as she saw Dustfinger approaching her. Why was his face so grave? Farid had said he was happy. Was it the sight of her that made him look so grim? Was he angry with her because she had followed him into his story, and her face reminded him of years that he surely wanted to forget? 'What does he want to talk to me about?' she had asked Farid.

'Probably Fenoglio,' Farid had said. 'And probably Cosimo too. He wants to know what the old man is planning!' As if she could have told Dustfinger that ...

When he stopped in front of her, there was not a sign on his face of the smile that she had always found so hard to interpret.

'Hello, Meggie,' he said. A marten blinked sleepily out of his rucksack, but it wasn't Gwin. Gwin was sitting on Farid's

shoulders, and hissed as the other marten's nose showed above Dustfinger's shoulder.

'Hello,' she said awkwardly. 'How are you?' It was strange to see him again. She felt both pleased and distrustful.

Behind them, people were flowing ceaselessly towards the city gate: peasants, tradesmen, entertainers, beggars, everyone who had heard of Cosimo's return. Although there were no telephones or newspapers in this world, and only the rich wrote letters, news travelled fast here.

'Fine! Yes, I'm really fine!' Now he was smiling after all, and not in his usual enigmatic way. Farid had told the truth. Dustfinger was happy. It almost seemed to embarrass him. His face looked so much younger, in spite of the scars; but suddenly it turned grave again.

The other marten jumped down on the ground when his master took the rucksack off his shoulders and brought out a piece of paper. 'I'd meant to talk to you about Cosimo, our Prince who has so surprisingly come back from the dead,' he said, unfolding the crumpled piece of paper. 'But I think I'd better show you this first.'

Baffled, Meggie took the note. When she saw the handwriting, she looked at Dustfinger with incredulity. How had he come by a letter from her mother? Here, in this world?

But all he said was: 'Read it.' And Meggie read it. The words were like a noose going around her neck, drawing tighter with every word, until she could scarcely breathe.

'What is it?' asked Farid uneasily. 'What does it say?' He looked at Dustfinger, but Dustfinger did not answer.

As for Meggie, she was staring at Resa's words. 'Mortola – Mortola shot Mo?'

Behind them, people were pushing forward to see Cosimo, the brand-new Cosimo, but why should she be interested?

Nothing else mattered to her now. There was just one thing she wanted to know.

‘How ...’ she said, and looked at Dustfinger in desperation, ‘how come they’re here? And how is Mo? It’s not too bad, is it?’

Dustfinger avoided her eyes. ‘All I know is what it says there,’ he said. ‘Mortola shot your father, Resa is with him in the Secret Camp, and she asked me to look for you. A friend brought me her note. He’s going back to the camp this morning, with Nettle. She—’

‘Nettle? Resa told me about her!’ Meggie interrupted him. ‘She’s a healer, a very good one ... she’ll make Mo better, won’t she?’

‘Of course,’ said Dustfinger, but he still didn’t look at her.

Farid’s gaze moved from him to Meggie in confusion. ‘Mortola shot Silvertongue?’ he stammered. ‘Then the root’s for him! But you said it was dangerous!’

Dustfinger cast him a warning glance, and Farid fell silent.

‘Dangerous?’ whispered Meggie. ‘What’s dangerous?’

‘Nothing, nothing at all. I’ll take you to them right away.’ Dustfinger slung the rucksack over his shoulder. ‘Go to Fenoglio and tell him you’ll be away for a few days. Tell him Farid and I will be with you. I don’t suppose the news will relieve his mind very much, but that’s too bad. Don’t say where we’re going, and don’t say why! News travels fast in these hills, and it would be better,’ he added, lowering his voice, ‘if Mortola doesn’t find out that your father is still alive. The camp where he is now is known only to the strolling players, and they’ve all had to swear an oath never to let anyone who isn’t one of us know about the place. But all the same ...’

‘... oaths are made to be broken!’ Meggie finished his sentence for him.

‘You said it.’ Dustfinger looked at the city gate. ‘Go now. It won’t be easy to get through that crowd, but hurry all the same.’

Tell the old man there's a minstrel woman who lives on that hill, he—'

'He knows who Roxane is,' Meggie interrupted.

'Of course!' This time Dustfinger's smile was bitter. 'I keep forgetting he knows all about me. Right, tell him to let Roxane know I must be away for a few days. And ask him to keep an eye on my daughter. I suppose he knows who she is too?'

Meggie just nodded.

'Good,' Dustfinger went on. 'Then tell the old man something else: if a single one of his accursed words harms Brianna, he'll rue the day he ever thought up a man who can summon fire.'

'I'll tell him!' Meggie whispered. Then she ran off, pushing and shoving her way through the crowds of people trying to get into the city. Mo, she thought. Mortola shot Mo. And her dream came back to her, her red, red dream.

Fenoglio was standing at the window when Meggie stumbled into his room.

'Good heavens, what do you think you look like?' he exclaimed. 'Didn't I tell you not to go out while all these people are thronging the streets? But that boy only has to whistle and you go running to him like a well-trained puppy!'

'Stop that!' snapped Meggie, so abruptly that Fenoglio actually did fall silent. 'You have to write something for me. And fast!'

She hauled him over to his desk, where Rosenquartz was quietly snoring away.

'Write what?' Confused, Fenoglio dropped into his chair.

'It's my father,' faltered Meggie, taking one of the freshly sharpened quill pens out of the jug with shaking fingers. 'He's here, but Mortola's shot him. He's very sick! Dustfinger didn't want to say so, but I could tell from the way he looked, so please write something, anything that will make him well

again. He's in the forest in the strolling players' secret camp. Please, hurry!'

Fenoglio looked at her in bewilderment. 'Shot your father? And he's here? But why? I don't understand!'

'You don't have to understand!' cried Meggie desperately. 'You just have to help him. Dustfinger's going to take me to him. And I'll read him better, understand? I mean, he's in your story now, you can even bring back the dead, so why can't you heal a wound too? Please!' She dipped the pen in the inkwell and put it into his hand.

'Heavens, Meggie!' murmured Fenoglio. 'This is bad, but ... but with the best will in the world I don't know what to write. I don't even know where he is. If at least I knew what the place looks like ...'

Meggie stared at him. Suddenly the tears she had been holding back all this time were flowing. 'Please!' she whispered. 'Just try! Dustfinger's waiting. Outside by the gate.'

Fenoglio looked at her, and gently took the pen from her hand.

'I'll try, then,' he said hoarsely. 'You're right, this is my story. I couldn't have helped him in the other world, but perhaps I can here. Go to the window,' he told her, when she had brought him two sheets of parchment. 'And look out of it, look at the people in the streets or the birds in the sky, occupy your mind somehow. Just don't look at me or I won't be able to write.'

Meggie obeyed. She saw Minerva and her children down in the crowd, and the woman who lived opposite, she watched pigs grunting as they pushed past the people, soldiers with the Laughing Prince's emblem on their chests – yet she wasn't really seeing any of it. She just heard Fenoglio dip his pen in the inkwell, heard it scratching over the parchment, pausing, and writing on again. Please, she thought, please let him find the right words. Please. The pen fell silent for a painfully long time, while down in the street a beggar pushed a child aside

with his crutch. Time passed slowly, like a shadow spreading. People thronged the streets, one dog barked at another, trumpets sounded from the castle, ringing out above the rooftops.

Meggie couldn't have said how much time had passed when, with a sigh, Fenoglio put down his pen. Rosenquartz was still snoring, stretched out straight as a ruler behind the sand-box. Fenoglio reached into the box and sprinkled sand over the wet ink.

'Did you – did you think of something?' Meggie hesitantly asked.

'Yes, yes, but don't ask me if I got it right.'

He handed her the parchment, and her eyes skimmed the words. There weren't many of them, but if they were indeed the right words, they would be enough.

'I didn't make him up, Meggie!' said Fenoglio in a soft voice. 'Your father isn't one of my characters, like Cosimo and Dustfinger and Capricorn. He doesn't belong here. So don't hope for too much, will you?'

Meggie nodded as she rolled up the parchment. 'Dustfinger wants you to keep an eye on his daughter while he's gone.'

'His daughter? Dustfinger has a daughter? Did I write that? Oh yes – indeed, weren't there two of them?'

'You know one of them anyway. She's Brianna, Her Ugliness's maid.'

'Brianna?' Fenoglio looked at her in astonishment.

'Yes.' Meggie picked up the leather bag that she had brought with her from the other world and went to the door. 'Look after her. I'm to say that if you don't, you'll rue the day you ever thought up someone who can call on fire.'

'He said that?' Fenoglio pushed back his chair and laughed. 'You know something? I like him better and better. I believe I'll

write another story about him, a story where he's the hero, and he doesn't—'

'Die?' Meggie opened the door. 'I'll tell him, but I think he's had more than enough of being in one of your stories.'

'But he *is* in one. He came back into my story of his own free will!' Fenoglio called after her as she hurried down the steps. 'We're all in it, Meggie, up to our necks in it! When are you coming back? I want you to meet Cosimo!'

Meggie did not reply. How was she to know when she'd be coming back?

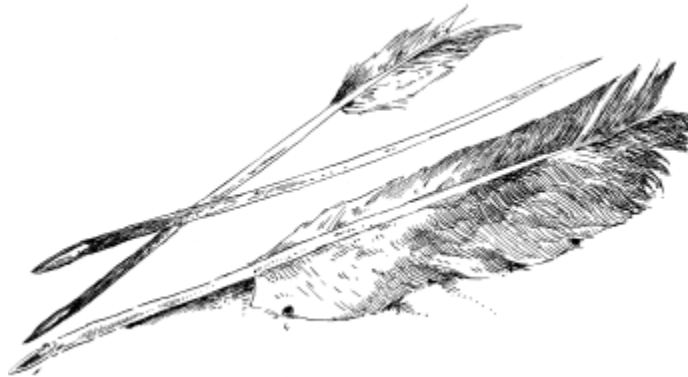
'You call that hurrying?' asked Dustfinger, when she was standing before him again, out of breath and putting Fenoglio's parchment in her bag. 'What's that parchment for? Did the old man give you one of his songs for nourishment along the way?'

'Something like that,' replied Meggie.

'Just so long as my name's not in it,' said Dustfinger, turning towards the road.

'Is it far?' called Meggie, as she hurried after him and Farid.

'We'll be there by evening,' said Dustfinger, over his shoulder.



Screams

I want to see thirst
In the syllables,
Touch fire
In the sound;
Feel through the dark
For the scream.

Pablo Neruda,
'Word',
Five Decades

The White Women were still there. Resa didn't seem to see them any more, but Mo felt their presence like shadows in sunlight. He didn't tell her about them. She looked so tired. The one thing that still kept her going was her hope that Dustfinger would soon arrive – with Meggie.

'You wait and see, he'll find her,' Resa kept whispering to him when he shook with fever. How could she be so sure? As if Dustfinger had never let them down, never stolen the book, never betrayed them ... Meggie. The need to see her once again was even stronger than the enticing whispers of the White Women, stronger than the pain in his breast ... and who could say, perhaps this accursed story might yet take a turn for the

better? Although Mo remembered Fenoglio's preference for unhappy endings only too well.

'Tell me what it looks like outside,' he sometimes whispered to Resa. 'It's ridiculous to be in a whole different world and see nothing of it but a cave.' And Resa described what he couldn't see – the trees, so much taller and older than any trees he had ever set eyes on, the fairies like swarms of gnats among the branches, the glass men in the tall bracken, and the nameless terrors of the night. Once she caught a fairy – Dustfinger had told her how to do it – and took it to him. She held the little creature in the hollow of her hands and put it close to his ear, so that he could hear the fairy's chirping, indignant voice.

It all seemed so real, however often he told himself it was made of nothing but paper and ink. The hard ground where he lay, the dry leaves that rustled when he tossed and turned in his fever, the bear's hot breath – and the Black Prince, whom he had last seen in the pages of a book. Now the man himself sometimes sat beside him, cooling his brow and talking quietly to Resa. Or was it all just a fevered dream?

Death felt real in this Inkworld too. Very real. It was strange to encounter death here in a world out of a book. But even if the dying was made only of words – even if, perhaps, it was nothing but a game played by the letters on the page – his body thought it was real. His heart felt fear, his flesh felt pain. And the White Women had not gone away, even if Resa couldn't see them. Mo felt them near him, every minute, every hour, every day and every night. Fenoglio's angels of death. Did they make dying easier than it was in the world he came from? No. Nothing could make it easier. You lost what you loved. That was death, here as well as there.

It was light outside when Mo heard the first scream. At first he thought the fever was taking hold of him again. But then he saw from Resa's face that she could hear it too: the clash of weapons, and screaming. Cries of fear – death cries. Mo tried to sit up, but the pain pounced on him like an animal digging its

teeth into his chest. He saw the Black Prince standing outside the cave, his sword drawn; he saw Resa jump up. Fever made her face blur before his eyes, but then Mo suddenly saw another picture: he saw Meggie sitting in Fenoglio's kitchen staring at the old man in horror as, full of pride, he told her of the fine death scene he had written for Dustfinger. Oh yes, Fenoglio liked sad stories. And perhaps he had just written another.

'Resa!' Mo cursed the way his tongue felt, heavy with fever. 'Resa, go and hide – hide somewhere in the forest.'

But she stayed with him as she always had – except for that one day, the day when his own voice had banished her.



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Blood-stained Straw

Goblins burrowed in the earth, elves sang songs in the trees: those were the obvious wonders of reading, but behind them lay the fundamental marvel that, in stories, words could command things to be.

Francis Spufford,
The Child That Books Built

Meggie had often felt frightened in the Wayless Wood with Farid, but it was different with Dustfinger. The trees seemed to rustle more loudly when he passed them, the bushes seemed to reach their branches out to him. Fairies settled on his rucksack like butterflies on a flower, pulling his hair until he brushed them away, talking to them. Other creatures, too, appeared and disappeared, beings whose names Meggie didn't know either from Resa's stories or from any other source, some of them no more than a pair of eyes among the trees.

Dustfinger led them as purposefully as if he could see their road laid out like a red guideline before him. He never even stopped to rest, but took them on and on, uphill and downhill, going deeper into the forest every hour. Away from human beings. When at last he stopped, Meggie's legs were shaking with exhaustion. It must be late in the afternoon. Dustfinger passed his hand over the snapped twigs of a bush, bent down,

examined the damp ground, and picked up a handful of berries that had been trodden underfoot.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Farid anxiously.

‘Too many feet. And above all, too many boots.’

Dustfinger swore quietly, and began to go faster. Too many boots ... Meggie realized what he meant when the camp appeared among the trees. She saw tents that had been torn down, a trampled campfire ...

‘You two stay here!’ Dustfinger ordered, and this time they obeyed. They watched anxiously as he stepped out of the shelter of the trees, looked around, raised tent panels, reached his hand into cold ashes – and turned over two bodies lying motionless near the fireplace. Meggie was going to follow him when she saw the corpses, but Farid held her back. When Dustfinger disappeared into a cave and came out again, pale-faced, Meggie tore herself away and ran to him.

‘Where are my parents? Are they in there?’ She recoiled as her foot struck another dead body.

‘No, there’s no one left in there. But I found this.’ Dustfinger held out a strip of fabric. Resa had a dress with that pattern. The fabric was blood-stained. ‘Do you know it?’

Meggie nodded.

‘Then your parents really were here. The blood is probably your father’s.’ Dustfinger passed a hand over his face. ‘Perhaps someone got away. Someone who can tell us what happened here. I’ll take a look around. Farid!’

Farid hurried to his side. Meggie was going to thrust her way past the two of them, but Dustfinger held her back. ‘Listen, Meggie!’ he said, putting his hands on her shoulders. ‘The fact that your parents aren’t here is a good sign. It probably means they’re still alive. There’s a bed in the cave; I expect your mother was nursing your father there. And I’ve found a bear’s paw-prints, which means the Black Prince was here. Perhaps all

this was a plan to capture him, although I don't know why they would have taken the others ... no, that I don't understand.'

Before setting off with Farid in search of survivors, Dustfinger told Meggie to wait in the cave. The entrance was tall and broad enough for a man to stand in it upright. The cave beyond it led deep into the mountain. The ground was strewn with leaves, and blankets and beds of straw were arranged side by side there, some of them just the right size for a child.

It was not difficult to see where Mo had been lying. The straw in that place was blood-stained, like the blanket lying beside it. A bowl of water, an overturned wooden mug, a bunch of dried flowers ... Meggie picked them up and ran her fingers over the petals. She knelt down and stared at the blood-stained straw. Fenoglio's parchment was close to her breast, but Mo was gone. How could Fenoglio's words help him now?

Try, something inside her whispered. You can't tell how powerful his words are in this world. It's made of them, after all.

She heard footsteps behind her. Farid and Dustfinger were back, and Dustfinger was holding a child in his arms, a little girl. She stared at Meggie wide-eyed, as if she were in a bad dream and couldn't wake up.

'She wouldn't talk to me, but luckily Farid inspires rather more confidence,' said Dustfinger, carefully putting the child down on her feet. 'She says her name is Lianna and she's five years old. And there were a lot of men: silver men with swords, and snakes on their breasts. Not so very surprising, if you ask me. They obviously killed the guards and some of those who defended themselves, and then took the rest away, even the women and children. As for the wounded,' he glanced briefly at Meggie – 'they were clearly loaded on to some kind of cart. The men had no horses with them. The girl is here only because her mother told her to hide among the trees.'

Gwin scurried into the cave, followed by Jink. The little girl jumped when the martens leaped up at Dustfinger. Then she watched, fascinated, as Farid took Gwin off Dustfinger's shoulder and put him on his own lap.

'Ask her if there were other children here,' said Dustfinger softly.

Farid held up five fingers and showed them to the girl. 'How many children, Lianna?'

The child looked at him and tapped first Farid's forefinger, then his second and third fingers. 'Merle. Fabio. Tinka,' she whispered.

'Three,' said Dustfinger. 'Probably no older than she is.'

Timidly, Lianna put her hand out to stroke Gwin's bushy tail, but Dustfinger held her fingers in a firm grip. 'Better not,' he said gently. 'He bites. Try the other one.'

'Meggie?' Farid came over to her. But Meggie did not answer him. She wound her arms tightly around her knees and buried her face in her skirt. She didn't want to see the cave any more. She didn't want to see any of Fenoglio's world any more, not even Farid and Dustfinger, or the girl who didn't know where her own parents were either. She wanted to be in Elinor's library, sitting in the big armchair where Elinor liked to read, and she wanted to see Mo put his head round the door and ask what the book on her lap was. But Mo wasn't here, perhaps he was gone for ever, and Fenoglio's story held her fast in its black, inky arms, whispering terrible things to her – about armed men who dragged away children, old people, the sick ... mothers and fathers.

'Nettle will soon be here with Cloud-Dancer,' she heard Dustfinger say. 'She'll look after the child.'

'What about us?' asked Farid.

'I'll follow them,' said Dustfinger. 'To find out how many are still alive, and where they're being taken. Although I think I

know.'

Meggie raised her head. 'To the Castle of Night.'

'Good guess.'

The child put her hand out to Jink; she was still small enough to find comfort for her grief in stroking an animal's fur. Meggie envied her.

'What do you mean, *you'll* follow them?' Farid shooed Gwin off his lap and stood up.

'Exactly what I said.' Dustfinger's face was as uncommunicative as a closed door. 'I will follow them while you two wait here for Cloud-Dancer and Nettle. Tell them I'm trying to follow the trail, and Cloud-Dancer is to take you back to Ombra. He's not fast enough to follow me with his stiff leg. Then tell Roxane what's happened, so she doesn't think I've vanished again, and Meggie will stay with Fenoglio.' His face was as well-controlled as ever when he looked at her, but in his eyes Meggie saw all that she herself was feeling: fear, anxiety, anger ... helpless anger.

'But we have to help them!' Farid's voice shook.

'How? The Black Prince might have been able to save them, but they've obviously caught him, and I don't know anyone else ready to risk his life for a few strolling players.'

'What about that robber everyone's talking about, the Bluejay?'

'There's no such person.' Meggie's voice was little more than a whisper. 'Fenoglio made him up.'

'Really?' Dustfinger looked at her thoughtfully. 'I've heard otherwise, but still ... well, as soon as you're in Ombra, get Cloud-Dancer to go to the strolling players and tell them what's happened. I know the Prince has men at his command, men who are devoted to him and probably well armed as well, but I've no idea where they are. Perhaps one of the strolling players may know. Or Cloud-Dancer himself. He must try to get word

to them somehow. There's a mill in Argenta called the Spelt-Mill. It's always been one of the few places south of the forest where people can meet or exchange news without the risk that it will come to the Adderhead's ears at once. The miller is so rich he doesn't even have to fear the men-at-arms. So if anyone wants to see me, or has any idea of how we can help the prisoners, let him send news there. I'll drop in now and then to ask if any messages have come. Understand?'

Meggie nodded. 'The Spelt-Mill,' she repeated quietly, unable to look anywhere but at the blood-stained straw.

'Right, Meggie can do all that, but I'm going with you.' Farid's voice sounded so defiant that the little girl, still kneeling silently beside Meggie, was upset and reached for her hand.

'I'm warning you, don't start on about looking after me again!' Dustfinger's voice was so sharp that Farid lowered his eyes. 'I'm going alone, and that's that. You take care of Meggie and the child until Nettle comes, and then get Cloud-Dancer to take you to Ombra.'

'No!' Meggie saw the tears in Farid's eyes, but Dustfinger just walked towards the cave entrance without another word. Gwin scuttled in front of him.

'If it gets dark before they arrive,' he added, looking over his shoulder at Farid, 'then light a fire. Not because of the soldiers. They have what they came for, but wolves and Night-Mares are always hungry: the wolves for your flesh, the Night-Mares for your fear.'

Then he was gone, and Farid stood there, his eyes blurred with tears. 'That bloody bastard!' he whispered. 'That thrice-accursed son of a bitch! But he'll soon see. I'm going to follow him. I *will* look after him! I swore I would.' Abruptly, he knelt down in front of Meggie and took her hand. 'You will go to Ombra, won't you? Please. I have to go after him. I know you understand!'

Meggie said nothing. What was there to say? That she wasn't going back any more than he was? He'd only have tried to persuade her not to go on. Jink rubbed against Farid's legs, and then scurried outside. The little girl ran after the marten, but stopped at the entrance to the cave – a small, forlorn figure, all alone. Like me, thought Meggie.

Without looking at Farid, she took Fenoglio's parchment out of her belt. The letters could scarcely be made out in the twilight that filled the cave.

'What's that?' Farid straightened up.

'Words. Only words, but better than nothing.'

'Wait, I'll give you a light.' Farid rubbed his fingertips together and whispered. A tiny flame appeared on his thumbnail. He blew gently on the little flame, until it grew like the flame of a candle, and then held his thumb above the parchment. The flickering light made the letters shine as if Rosenquartz had retraced them with fresh ink.

Useless, something whispered in Meggie. The words will be useless! Mo isn't here, he's far away, he may not even be alive any more. Shut up! she snapped at this internal voice. I'm not listening. This is all I can do, there's nothing else, nothing at all! She picked up the blood-stained blanket, placed the parchment on it, and ran her fingers over her lips. The little girl was still standing outside the cave, waiting for her mother to come back.

'Read it, Meggie!' Farid nodded at her encouragingly. And she read it, her fingers clutching the blanket stained with Mo's dried blood. *'Mortimer felt the pain ...'* She thought she felt it herself, in the sound of every letter on her tongue, in every word that passed her lips. *'The wound was burning. It burned like the hatred in Mortola's eyes when she had shot him. Perhaps it was her hatred that was sucking the life out of him, making him weaker and weaker. He felt his own blood wet and warm on his skin. He felt Death reaching out to him. But all of a sudden there was*

something else too: words. Words that relieved the pain, cooled his brow and spoke of love, nothing but love. They made his breathing easier again, and healed the place where death had been flowing in. He felt the sound of them on his skin and deep in his heart. They echoed ever louder, ever more clearly through the darkness that threatened to swallow him up, and suddenly he knew the voice speaking the words: it was his daughter's voice, and the White Women withdrew their pale hands as if they had burned themselves on her love.'

Meggie buried her face in her hands. The parchment rolled up on her lap of its own accord, as if it had served its purpose. Straw pricked her through her dress, as it had in the shed where Capricorn had once imprisoned her and Mo. She felt someone stroking her hair, and for a moment, a crazy moment, she thought Fenoglio's words had brought Mo back, back to the cave safe and sound, and everything was all right again. But when she raised her head it was only Farid standing beside her.

'That was beautiful,' he said. 'I'm sure it helped. You wait and see.'

But Meggie shook her head. 'No!' she whispered. 'No. Those were only beautiful words, but my father isn't made of Fenoglio's words. He's made of flesh and blood.'

'So? What difference does that make?' Farid removed her hands from her tear-stained face. 'Perhaps everything's just made of words. Look at me, for instance. Pinch me. Am I made of paper?'

No, he wasn't. And Meggie had to smile when he kissed her, although she was still shedding tears.

Dustfinger had not been gone long when they heard footsteps among the trees. Farid had taken Dustfinger's advice and made a fire, and Meggie was sitting close to him with the little girl's head on her lap. Nettle said not a word as she emerged from the darkness and saw the wrecked camp. Silently, she went

from one dead body to another, looking for life where none was left, while Cloud-Dancer, his face unmoving, listened to the message Dustfinger had left for him. It was only when Meggie asked Cloud-Dancer to take a message, not just to Roxane and the strolling players, but to Fenoglio too, that Farid fully realized she didn't intend to go back to Ombra any more than he did. His expressionless face didn't show whether he was angry or glad.

'I've written my message for Fenoglio.' With a heavy heart, Meggie had torn a page for it out of the notebook that Mo had given her. On the other hand, what better use could she put it to than saving him? If it was still possible to save him. 'You'll find Fenoglio in Minerva's house, in Cobblers' Alley. And it's very important that no one else reads the message.'

'I know the Inkweaver!' Cloud-Dancer watched Nettle draw a ragged cloak over the face of another dead man. Then he frowned at the sheet of paper with Meggie's writing on it. 'There've been messengers who were hanged for the words they carried. I hope these aren't that kind? No, don't tell me!' he said defensively, as Meggie was about to answer. 'Usually I ask the sender to tell me the words of any message I carry, but with this one I have a feeling I'd better not know.'

'What do you suppose she's written?' asked Nettle bitterly. 'No doubt she was thanking the old man for writing the songs that will bring her father to the gallows! Or is he to write a dirge for him, the Bluejay's last song? I scented misfortune the moment I saw that scar on his arm. I always thought the Bluejay was just a fancy, like all the noble princes and princesses in other songs. Well, you were wrong there, Nettle, said I to myself, and you're certainly not the first to notice the scar. So the Inkweaver had to go and describe it in detail! Curse the old fool and his silly songs! Men have been hanged before because they were taken for the Bluejay, but now it seems the Adderhead has the right man in his hands, and the game of playing heroes is over. Protecting the weak, robbing the strong

... yes, it all sounds very fine, but heroes aren't immortal except in songs, and your father will find only too soon that a mask doesn't protect you from death.'

Meggie just sat there and stared at the old woman. What was she talking about?

'Why are you looking at me like that, so surprised?' asked Nettle. 'Do you think the Adderhead sent his men here for a few old strolling players and pregnant women, or for the Black Prince? Nonsense. The Black Prince never hid from the Adder yet. No. Someone slipped off to the Castle of Night and whispered in the Adderhead's ear that the Bluejay was lying wounded in the strolling players' secret camp and could easily be picked up, along with the poor players who were hiding him. It will have been someone who knows the camp and has surely been paid good silver for his treachery. The Adderhead will make a great spectacle of the execution, the Inkweaver will write a touching song about it, and perhaps someone else will soon wear the feathered mask, for they'll go on singing those songs long after your father's dead and buried behind the Castle of Night.'

Meggie heard her own blood surging through her veins.

'What scar are you talking about?' Her voice was little more than a whisper.

'Why, the scar on his left arm! Surely you must know it? The songs say that the Adderhead's hounds bit the Bluejay there when he was hunting their master's white stags ...'

Fenoglio. What had he done?

Meggie covered her mouth with her hand. She once again heard Fenoglio's voice on the spiral staircase as they were going down from Balbulus's workshop. *I like to base my characters on real people. Not every writer does that, but in my experience it makes them more lifelike! Facial expressions, gestures, the way someone walks, a voice, perhaps a birthmark or a scar – I steal something here, something there, and then they begin to breathe,*

until anyone hearing or reading about them thinks they can touch them! I didn't have a wide choice for the Bluejay ...

Mo. Fenoglio had taken her father as his model.

Meggie stared at the sleeping child. She too had often slept like that, with her head in Mo's lap.

'Meggie's father is the Bluejay?' Farid, beside her, uttered an incredulous laugh. 'What nonsense! Silvertongue can't even bring himself to kill a rabbit. You mark my words, Meggie, the Adderhead will soon realize that, and then he'll let him go. Come on!' He rose to his feet and offered her his hand. 'We must start out or we'll never catch up with Dustfinger!'

'You're going after him now?' Nettle shook her head at such folly, while Meggie laid the little girl's head down on the grass.

'Keep going south if you miss his trail in the dark,' said Cloud-Dancer. 'Due south, and then you'll reach the road some time. But beware of wolves. There are many wolves in these parts.'

Farid just nodded. 'I have fire with me,' he said, making a spark dance on the palm of his hand.

Cloud-Dancer grinned. 'Well done! Perhaps you really are Dustfinger's son, as Roxane suspects!'

'Who knows?' was all Farid would reply, and he led Meggie away with him.

She followed him into the dark trees, feeling numb. A robber! She could think of nothing else. He had made Mo into a robber, a part of his story! At that moment she hated Fenoglio just as much as Dustfinger did.

An Audience for Fenoglio

‘Lady Cora,’ he said, ‘sometimes one has to do things which are unpalatable. When great issues are involved one can’t toy with the situation in silk gloves. No. We are making history.’

**Mervyn Peake,
*Titus Groan***

Fenoglio was pacing up and down his room. Seven steps to the window, seven back to the door. Meggie had gone, and there was no one who could tell him if she’d found her father still alive. What an appalling muddle! Whenever he began to hope he was getting things under control again, something happened that did not remotely suit his plans. Perhaps another man really did exist somewhere – a diabolical storyteller who was continuing his tale, giving it new twists and turns, unpredictable and unpleasant developments, moving his characters as if they were chessmen, or simply placing new ones who had nothing to do with his own story on the chessboard!

And still Cosimo had sent no messenger. Well, I must exercise a little more patience, Fenoglio told himself. He’s only just ascended his throne, and I’m sure he has a great deal to do. All his subjects wanting to see him, petitioners, widows, orphans,

his administrators, gamekeepers, his son, his wife ... ‘Oh, nonsense! I’m the one he should have sent for first of all!’ Fenoglio uttered the words so angrily that he was startled by the sound of his own voice. ‘I, the man who brought him back to life, who made him in the first place!’

He went to the window and looked up at the castle. The Adderhead’s banner flew from the left-hand tower. Yes, the Adderhead was in Ombra, and must have ridden like the devil to see his son-in-law newly back from the dead, in person. He hadn’t brought Firefox with him this time; no doubt the man was busy looting or murdering elsewhere on his master’s behalf, but the Piper was still abroad in the streets of Ombra, always with a few men-at-arms in his wake. What did they want here? Did the Adderhead still seriously hope to place his grandson on the throne?

No, Cosimo would never allow it.

For a moment Fenoglio forgot his dark mood, and a smile stole over his face. Ah, if he could only have told the Adderhead who had wrecked his fine plans! A writer! How that would have angered him! They had given him an unpleasant surprise – he with his words, Meggie with her voice ...

Poor Meggie ... poor Mortimer ...

How pleadingly she had looked at him. And what a farcical performance he had put on for her! Yet how could the poor thing have thought for a moment that he could help her father, when he himself hadn’t even brought Mortimer here? Quite apart from the fact that Mortimer wasn’t one of his creations in the first place. But that look of hers! He simply had not the heart to let her leave without any hope at all!

Rosenquartz was sitting on the desk with his transparent legs crossed, throwing breadcrumbs at the fairies.

‘Stop that!’ Fenoglio snapped. ‘Do you want them to grab you by the legs and try throwing you out of the window again? I won’t save you this time, believe you me. I won’t even sweep

you up when you're a little pile of broken glass down there in the pigs' muck. The refuse collector can shovel you into his barrow instead.'

'That's right, take your bad temper out on me!' The glass man turned his back on Fenoglio. 'It won't make Cosimo summon you any sooner, though!'

Here, unfortunately, he was right. Fenoglio went to the window. In the streets below, the excitement over Cosimo's return had died down, and perhaps the Adderhead's presence had cast a damper on it too. People were going about their business again, the pigs were rooting about among the refuse, children were chasing each other around the close-packed houses, and now and then an armed soldier made his way through the crowd. There were clearly more soldiers about than usual in Ombra now. Cosimo was obviously having them patrol the city, perhaps to prevent the men-at-arms riding his subjects down again just because they were in the way. Yes, Cosimo will see to everything, thought Fenoglio. He'll be a good prince, in so far as any princes are good. Who knows, perhaps he'll even allow the strolling players back into Ombra on ordinary market days soon.

'That's it. That will be my first piece of advice. To let the players back again,' murmured Fenoglio. 'And if he doesn't send for me by this evening I'll go to him unasked. What's the ungrateful fellow thinking of? Does he suppose men get brought back from the dead every day?'

'I thought he'd never been dead at all?' Rosenquartz clambered up to his nest. He was out of reach there, as he very well knew. 'What about Meggie's father, then? Do you think he's still alive?'

'How should I know?' replied Fenoglio irritably. He didn't want to be reminded of Mortimer. 'Well, at least no one can blame me for *that* mess!' he growled. 'I can't help it if they're all

knocking my story about, like a tree that just has to be thoroughly pruned to make it bear fruit.'

'Pruned?' Rosenquartz piped up. 'No, they're adding things. Your story is growing – growing like a weed! And not a particularly pretty one either, if you ask me.'

Fenoglio was just wondering whether to throw the inkwell at him when Minerva put her head round the door.

'A messenger, Fenoglio!' Her face was flushed, as if she had run too fast. 'A messenger from the castle! He wants to see you! Cosimo wants to see you!'

Fenoglio hurried to the door, smoothing down the tunic that Minerva had made him. He had been wearing it for days, it was badly crumpled, but there was no helping that now. When he had tried to pay Minerva for it she had just shaken her head, saying he'd paid already – with the stories he told her children day after day, evening after evening. It was a fine tunic, though, even if fairy-tales for children had paid for it.

The messenger was waiting down in the street outside the house, looking important and frowning impatiently. He wore the black mourning cloak, as if the Prince of Sighs were still on the throne.

Oh well, it will all be different now, thought Fenoglio. It will most definitely be different. From now on I, and not my characters, will be telling this story again.

His guide didn't even look round at him as he hurried along the streets after the man. Surly oaf! Fenoglio thought. But this character probably really was a product of his, Fenoglio's, pen – one of the many anonymous people with whom he had populated this world so that his main characters wouldn't be rattling about it on their own.

A number of men-at-arms were loafing around outside the stables in the Outer Courtyard of the castle. Fenoglio wondered, with annoyance, what they were doing there. Cosimo's men were pacing back and forth up on the battlements, like hounds

set to keep watch on a pack of wolves. The men-at-arms stared up at them with hostility. Yes, you look at that, thought Fenoglio. There'll be no leading part in my story for *your* dark lord, only a death fit for a thoroughgoing villain. Perhaps he'd invent another one some time, for stories soon get boring without a proper villain, but it was unlikely that Meggie would lend him her voice to call such a character to life.

The guards at the Inner Gate raised their spears.

'What's all this?' Fenoglio heard the Adderhead's voice the moment he set foot in the Inner Courtyard. 'Are you telling me he's still keeping me waiting, you lousy fur-faced creature?'

A softer voice answered, apprehensive and scared. Fenoglio saw the Laughing Prince's dwarfish servant Tullio facing the Adderhead. He came only up to the prince's silver-studded belt. Two of the Laughing Prince's guards stood behind him, but the Adderhead was at the head of at least twenty heavily armed men: an intimidating sight, even if Firefox wasn't with them, and nor was there any sign of the Piper.

'Your daughter will receive you, sir.' Tullio's voice shook like a leaf in the wind.

'My daughter? If I want Violante's company I'll summon her to my own castle. No, I want to see this dead man who's come to life! So you will now take me to Cosimo at once, you stinking brownie bastard!'

The unfortunate Tullio began trembling. 'The Prince of Ombra,' he began again, in a thread of a voice, 'will not receive you!'

These words made Fenoglio stumble back as if he had been struck in the chest – right into the nearest rosebush, where the thorns caught in his new tunic. What was going on? Cosimo wouldn't receive the Adderhead? Was that part of his own plan?

The Adderhead thrust out his lips as if he had a bad taste in his mouth. The veins at his temples stood out, dark on his

blotched and ruddy skin. His lizard-like eyes stared down at Tullio. Then he took the crossbow from the nearest soldier's hand and, as Tullio ducked like a frightened rabbit, aimed at one of the birds in the sky above. It was a good shot. The bird fell right at the Adderhead's feet, its yellow feathers red with blood. A gold-mocker: Fenoglio had invented them especially for the castle of the Prince of Sighs. The Adderhead bent and pulled the arrow out of its tiny breast.

'Here, take that!' he said, pressing the dead bird into Tullio's hand. 'And tell your master that he has obviously left his common sense behind in the realm of the dead. I'll allow that to be some excuse this once, but should he send you to me with such an outrageous message when next I visit him, he'll get not a bird back, but you with an arrow in *your* breast. Will you tell him that?'

Tullio stared at the blood-stained bird he was holding, and nodded.

As for the Adderhead, he turned on his heel and waved to his men to follow him. Fenoglio's guide bent his head timorously as they marched past. 'Look him straight in the eye!' Fenoglio told himself, as the Adderhead passed so close to him that he thought he could smell his sweat. 'You invented him!' But instead he hunched his head between his shoulders, like a tortoise sensing danger, and did not move until the Inner Gate had closed behind the last of the men-at-arms.

Tullio was still waiting at the door which had shut behind the Adderhead, staring at the dead bird in his hand. 'Should I show it to Cosimo?' he asked, looking distressed, as they came up to him.

'Oh, have it roasted in the kitchen and eat it if you like!' Fenoglio's guide snarled at him. 'But get out of my way.'

The throne-room hadn't changed since Fenoglio's last visit. The windows were still hung with black. The only light came from

candles, and the blank eyes of the statues stared at everyone who approached the throne itself. But now their living, breathing model sat on the throne, resembling his stone copies so much that the dark hall seemed to Fenoglio like a cabinet of mirrors.

Cosimo was alone. Neither Her Ugliness nor her son was to be seen. There were only six guards standing in the background, almost invisible in the dim light.

Fenoglio stopped at a suitable distance from the steps up to the throne, and bowed. Although it was his opinion that no one in this or any other world deserved to have him – Fenoglio – bow his head to them, certainly not those whom his own words had called to life, nevertheless he too had to observe the rules of the game in this world of his own creation. Here it was as natural to bow to nobles dressed in silk and velvet as it had been to shake hands in his old world.

Go on, then, old man, bow, even if it hurts your back, he thought, bending his head a little more humbly. You fixed it this way yourself.

Cosimo examined him as if he were not sure whether he remembered his face. He was dressed entirely in white, which emphasized his likeness to the statues even more.

‘You are the poet Fenoglio, also known as the Inkweaver, is that so?’ Fenoglio had imagined that the voice would be rather fuller. Cosimo looked at the statues, letting his eyes wander from one to another. ‘Someone recommended me to summon you. I believe it was my wife. She says you have the cleverest mind to be found between this castle and the Adderhead’s, and she thinks I shall need clever minds. But that’s not why I called for you.’

Violante? Violante had recommended him? Fenoglio tried to hide his surprise. ‘No? Why then, Your Grace?’ he asked.

Cosimo’s eyes rested on him as abstractedly as if he were looking straight through him. Then he glanced down at himself,

plucked at the magnificent tunic he wore, and adjusted his belt. 'My clothes don't fit any more,' he observed. 'They're all a little too long or too wide, as if they'd been made for those statues and not for me.'

He smiled at Fenoglio rather helplessly. It was the smile of an angel.

'You ... er ... you've been through a difficult time, Your Grace,' said Fenoglio.

'Yes. Yes, so I'm told. You see, I don't remember. There's very little I can remember at all. My head feels strangely empty.' He passed a hand over his brow and looked at the statues again. 'That's why I summoned you,' he said. 'They say you're a master of words, and I want you to help me to remember. I'm giving you the task of writing down everything there is to say about Cosimo. Get my soldiers to tell you, my servants, my old nurse, my ... wife.' He hesitated for a moment before saying that last word. 'Balbulus will write your stories out and illuminate them, and then I'll have them read to me, to fill the empty space in my head and heart with words and images again. Do you think you can do it?'

Fenoglio hastily nodded. 'Oh yes, of course, Your Grace. I'll write it all down. Stories of your childhood, when your worthy father was still alive, tales of your first rides through the Wayless Wood, everything about the day your wife came to this castle, and the day your son was born.'

Cosimo nodded. 'Yes, yes!' he said, and there was relief in his voice. 'I see you understand. And don't forget my victory over the fire-raisers, and the time I spent with the White Women.'

'I certainly will not.' Fenoglio examined the handsome face as unobtrusively as possible. How could this have happened? He had been meant not just to believe that he was the real Cosimo, but to share all the dead man's memories too ...

Cosimo rose from the throne occupied by his father not so long ago, and began pacing up and down. 'I've already been

told several stories myself. By my wife.'

Her Ugliness again. Fenoglio looked around for her. 'Where is your wife?'

'Looking for my son. He ran away because I wouldn't receive his grandfather.'

'If I may make so bold, Your Grace – why wouldn't you receive him?'

The heavy door opened behind Fenoglio's back, and Tullio scurried in. He was no longer holding the dead bird as he crouched on the steps at Cosimo's feet, but fear still lingered on his face.

'I do not intend ever to receive him again.' Cosimo stopped in front of the throne and patted the emblem of his house. 'I have told the guards at the gate not to let my father-in-law into this castle another time, or any who serve him.'

Tullio looked up at him in alarm and incredulity, as if he already felt the Adderhead's arrow in his own furry breast.

But Cosimo, unmoved, was continuing. 'I have had myself informed of what went on in my realm while I—' and he hesitated for a moment again before going on – 'while I was away. Yes, let's call it that: away. I have listened to my administrators, head foresters, merchants and peasants, my soldiers and my wife. In the process I have learned some very interesting things. Alarming things. And just imagine, poet: my father-in-law had something to do with almost every bad tale that I hear. Tell me, since I believe you go in and out of the strolling players' tents: what do the Motley Folk say about the Adderhead?'

'The Motley Folk?' Fenoglio cleared his throat. 'Well, what everyone says. They say he's very powerful, perhaps rather too powerful.'

Cosimo uttered a mirthless laugh. 'Oh yes. He is indeed. And?'

What was he getting at? You should know, Fenoglio, he told himself uneasily. If you don't know what's going on in his head, then who does? 'Well, they say the Adderhead rules with an iron fist,' he went on hesitantly. 'There's no law in Argenta but his own word and his seal. He is vengeful and vain, he extorts so much from his peasants that they go hungry, he sends rebellious subjects to his silver mines, even children, until they're spitting blood down in the depths. Poachers caught in his part of the forest are blinded, thieves have their right hands cut off – I am glad to say your father abolished that custom some time ago – and the only minstrel who can safely approach the Castle of Night is the Piper – when he's not plundering villages with Firefox.' Good heavens, did I write all this? thought Fenoglio. I suppose I did.

'Yes, I've heard all that too. What else?' Cosimo folded his arms over his chest and began pacing up and down, up and down. He really was as beautiful as an angel. Perhaps I ought to have made him a little less beautiful, thought Fenoglio. He looks almost unreal.

'What else?' He frowned. 'The Adderhead was always afraid of death, but as he gets older they say it's become almost an obsession. He is said to spend the night on his knees, sobbing and cursing, shaking with fear that the White Women will come for him. They also say that he washes several times a day, for fear of sickness and infection, and he sends envoys to distant lands, with chests full of silver to buy him miracle cures for old age. And the women he marries are younger and younger. He hopes that a son will be born to him at long last.'

Cosimo had stopped pacing. 'Yes!' he said softly. 'Yes, I have heard all that too. But there are even worse stories. When are you coming to those – or must I tell them myself?' And before Fenoglio could answer he went on: 'They say the Adderhead sends Firefox over the border by night to extort goods from my peasants. They say he claims the whole Wayless Wood for himself, he has my merchants plundered when they come

ashore in his harbours, demands high tolls from them for the use of his streets and bridges, and pays footpads to make my roads unsafe. They say he has the timber for his ships chopped down in my part of the forest, and keeps his informers in this castle and in every street in Ombra. They say he even paid my own son to tell him everything my father discussed with his councillors in this hall. And finally –’ Cosimo paused for effect before he went on – ‘I am assured that the messenger who warned the fire-raisers of my forthcoming attack on them was sent by my father-in-law. I’m told he ate quails covered in silver leaf to celebrate my death, and sent my father a letter of sympathy on parchment so cleverly painted with poison that every character on it was deadly as snake’s venom. So do you still wonder why I wouldn’t receive him?’

Poisoned parchment? Good heavens, who’d think up something like that? thought Fenoglio. Not I, for one!

‘Are you at a loss for words, poet?’ asked Cosimo. ‘Well, I can tell you I felt the same when I was told all these terrible things. What can one say of such a neighbour? What do *you* think of the rumour that the Adderhead had my wife’s mother poisoned because she liked listening to a minstrel too much? What do you think of his sending Firefox his own men-at-arms as reinforcements, to make quite sure that I never returned from the fire-raisers’ fortress? My father-in-law tried to do away with me, poet! I have forgotten a year of my life, and everything before it is as vague in my mind as if someone else had lived it. They say I was dead. They say the White Women took me away. They ask: where have you been, Cosimo? And I don’t know the answer! But now I know who wanted my death, and I know who to blame for the way I feel now: empty like a gutted fish, younger than my own son. Tell me, what’s the appropriate punishment for crimes of such a monstrous kind against both me and others?’

But Fenoglio could only look at him. Who is he? he asked himself. For heaven’s sake, Fenoglio, you know what he looks

like, but who is he? 'You tell me!' he replied at last, hoarsely.

And Cosimo gave him that angelic smile again. 'Why, there's only one appropriate punishment, poet!' he said. 'I will go to war. I'll wage war against my father-in-law until the Castle of Night is razed to the ground and his name is forgotten.'

Fenoglio stood there in the darkened hall, hearing his own blood roaring in his ears. War? I must have misheard, he thought. I never wrote anything about war. But a voice began whispering inside him: a great new age, Fenoglio! Didn't you write something about a great new age?

'He has the impudence to ride to my castle with men in his retinue who have already pillaged and burned for Capricorn; he's made Firefox, whom I rode out to defeat, his herald; he's sent the Piper here as protector of my son! The audacity of it! Perhaps he could deride my father in that way, but not me. I'll show him he's not dealing with a prince who's either shedding tears or over-eating now.' A faint flush had risen to Cosimo's face. Anger made him even more handsome.

War. Think, Fenoglio. Think. War! Is that what you wanted? He felt his old knees beginning to tremble.

As for Cosimo, he laid his hand almost lovingly on his sword. He slowly drew it from the scabbard. 'It was for this alone that death spared me, poet,' he said, cutting the air with the long, slender blade. 'So that I could bring justice to this world and turn the Devil himself off his throne. That's worth fighting for, don't you think? Even worth dying for.' He was a fine sight standing there with the drawn sword in his hand. And yes, wasn't he right? Perhaps war really was the only way to put the Adderhead in his place.

'You must help me, Inkweaver! That's what they call you, don't they? I like the name!' Cosimo gracefully sheathed the sword again. Tullio, who was still sitting on the steps at his feet, shuddered as the sharp blade scraped the leather scabbard. 'You will write a speech for me, calling my people to arms. You will

explain our cause to them, you'll plant enthusiasm for that cause and hatred for our enemy in every heart. And we'll use the strolling players too – you're a friend of theirs. Write them fiery songs, poet! Songs that will make men want to fight. You forge the words, I'll have the swords forged. Many, many swords.'

He stood there like an avenging angel, lacking nothing but the wings, and for the first, the very first time in his life Fenoglio felt something like affection for one of his inky creations. I'll give him wings, he thought. I will indeed. With my words.

'Your Highness!' When he bowed his head this time it wasn't difficult, and for a wonderful moment he felt almost as if he had written himself the son he never had. Don't go turning sentimental in your old age, he told himself, but this warning made no difference to the unaccustomed softening of his heart.

I ought to ride with him, he thought. Yes, indeed. I'll go to war against the Adderhead with him, old as I may be. Fenoglio, a hero in the world of his own creation, a poet and a warrior too. It was a role he'd like. As if he had written himself the perfect part to play.

Cosimo smiled again. Fenoglio would have bet everything he had that there was no more delightful smile in this or any other world. Tullio seemed to have succumbed to Cosimo's charm too, despite the fear the Adderhead had put into his heart. Enchanted, he stared up at the master who had come back to him, his little hands in his lap as if they were still holding the bird with the bloody breast.

'I hear your words already!' said Cosimo, returning to the throne. 'My wife loves written words, you know, words that stick to parchment and paper like dead flies, and it seems my father felt the same – but I want to *hear* words, not read them! Remember that, when you're looking for the right words: you must ask yourself what they *sound* like! Glowing with passion,

dark with sorrow, sweet with love, that's what I want. Write words quivering with all our righteous anger at the Adderhead's evil deeds, and soon that anger will be in every heart. You will write my accusation, my fiery accusation, and we'll have it read out in every market place and spread abroad by the strolling players: *Beware, Adderhead!* Let it be heard all the way to his own side of the forest. *Your wicked days are numbered!* And soon every peasant will want to fight under my banner, every man young or old, your words will bring them flocking here to the castle! I've heard that when the Adderhead doesn't like what books say he'll sometimes have them burned in the fireplaces of his castle, but how will he burn words that everyone is singing and speaking?'

He could always burn the man who speaks them, thought Fenoglio. Or the man who wrote them. It was an uncomfortable thought that cooled the ardour of his heart slightly, but Cosimo seemed to have picked it up.

'I shall, of course, take you under my personal protection immediately,' he said. 'In future you will live here at the castle, in apartments suitable for a court poet.'

'At the castle?' Fenoglio cleared his throat, so awkward did this offer make him feel. 'That ... that's very generous of you. Yes, indeed.' New times were coming, new and wonderful times. A great new age ...

'You will be a good Prince, Your Grace!' he said, his voice much moved. 'A good and great Prince. And my songs about you will still be sung in centuries to come, when the Adderhead is long forgotten. I promise you that.'

Footsteps sounded behind him. Fenoglio turned, annoyed by the interruption at such an emotional moment. Violante came hurrying through the hall, holding her son's hand, with her maid behind her.

'Cosimo!' she cried. 'Listen to him. Your son wants to say he's sorry.'

Fenoglio didn't think that Jacopo looked at all sorry. Violante was having to drag him along behind her, and his face was dark as thunder. He didn't seem particularly pleased by his father's return. His mother, on the other hand, was radiant as Fenoglio had never seen her before, and the mark on her face was not much darker than a shadow cast by the sun.

The birthmark on Her Ugliness's face faded. Oh, thank you, Meggie, he thought. What a pity you're not here ...

'I won't say sorry!' announced Jacopo, as his mother propelled him none too gently up the steps to the throne. 'He's the one who ought to say sorry to my grandfather!'

Unobtrusively, Fenoglio took a step back. Time for him to go.

'Do you remember me?' he heard Cosimo ask. 'Was I a stern father?'

Jacopo merely shrugged.

'Oh yes, you were very stern!' Her Ugliness replied on the child's behalf. 'You took away his hounds when he acted like this. And his horse.'

She was clever, cleverer than Fenoglio had expected. He went quietly towards the door. It was a good thing he'd soon be living at the castle. He must keep an eye on Violante, or she'd soon be filling the blank of Cosimo's memory to her own liking – as if stuffing a newly prepared turkey. When the servants opened the great door he saw Cosimo abstractedly smiling at his wife. He's grateful to her, thought Fenoglio, grateful to her for filling his emptiness with her words, but he doesn't love her.

And of course that's another thing you never thought of, Fenoglio, he told himself reproachfully as he walked through the Inner Courtyard. Why didn't you write a word about Cosimo loving his wife? Didn't you tell Meggie the story, long ago, about the flower maiden who gave her heart to the wrong man? What are stories for if we don't learn from them? Well, at least Violante loved Cosimo. You only had to look at her to see it. That was something, after all ...

On the other hand ... Violante's maid, the girl with the beautiful hair, Brianna, who Meggie said was Dustfinger's daughter – hadn't she seemed equally enraptured when she looked at Cosimo? And Cosimo himself – hadn't he looked at the maid more often than at his wife? Oh, never mind, thought Fenoglio. There'll soon be more important matters at stake than love. Far more important matters ...



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Another Messenger

The strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink.

**Chinese proverb,
*Die Weisse und die Schwarze Kunst***

The Adderhead and his men-at-arms had disappeared when Fenoglio came out of the gate of the Inner Castle. Good, thought Fenoglio. He'll be fuming with rage on his long ride home! The thought of it made him smile. A number of men were waiting in the Outer Courtyard. It was easy to guess their trade from their blackened hands, even though no doubt they had scrubbed them thoroughly for their Prince. The entire population of Smiths' Alley in Ombra seemed to have come up to the castle. *You forge the words, I'll have the swords forged, many, many swords.* Had Cosimo's preparations for his war begun already? If so, it's time I set to work on my words, Fenoglio told himself.

As he turned into Cobblers' Alley he thought for a moment that he heard steps behind him, but when he turned there was only a one-legged beggar hobbling laboriously past him. At every other step the beggar's crutch slipped in the filth lying among the houses – pig dung, vegetable refuse, stinking puddles of whatever fluids people tipped out of their windows.

Well, there'll soon be cripples enough, thought Fenoglio as he walked on towards Minerva's house. You could call war a cripple factory ... What kind of idea was that? Were doubts of Cosimo's plans stirring in his elated mind? Oh, let it alone ...

By all the letters of the alphabet, I'm certainly not going to miss this climb once I'm living in the castle, he thought as he toiled up the stairway to his room. I must just remember to ask Cosimo not, on any account, to give me quarters in one of the towers. The climb up to Balbulus's workshop was bad enough! *Oh, so these few steps are too steep for you, but you trust yourself to go to war in your old age, do you?* said a quiet, mocking voice inside him. It always spoke up at the most inappropriate moments, but Fenoglio had plenty of practice in ignoring it.

Rosenquartz wasn't there. Presumably he had climbed out of the window again to visit the glass man working for the scribe who lived over the road in Bakers' Alley. The fairies all seemed to have flown away too. It was quiet in Fenoglio's room, unusually quiet. He sat down on his bed, sighing. He didn't know why, but he couldn't help thinking of his grandchildren, and the way they used to fill his house with noise and laughter. So what? he thought, feeling angry with himself. Minerva's children make just the same kind of noise, and think how often you've sent them packing down to the yard because it was too much for you!

Footsteps came up the stairs. *Well, speak of the devil ...!* He didn't feel like telling stories, not at the moment. He had to pack his things, and then break the news gently to Minerva that she must look around for a new lodger.

'Go away!' he called to whoever was at the door. 'Go and tease the pigs or chickens in the yard! The Inkweaver doesn't have time just now. He's moving to the castle.'

The door swung open all the same, but not to reveal two children's faces. A man stood there – a man with a blotched face and slightly protuberant eyes. Fenoglio had never seen him

before, yet he seemed strangely familiar. His leather trousers were patched and dirty, but the colour of his cloak made Fenoglio's heart beat faster. It was the Adderhead's silvery grey.

'What's the idea?' he asked brusquely, getting to his feet, but the stranger was already through the doorway. He stood there with his legs spread, his grin as ugly as his face itself, but it was the sight of his companion that made Fenoglio's old knees feel weak. Basta was smiling at him like a long-lost friend. He too wore the silver of the Adderhead.

'Bad luck again! Talk about terrible luck!' said Basta, looking round the room. 'The girl's not here. And there we go stalking you all the way from the castle, quiet as cats, thinking we'll catch two birds with one stone, and now it's just one ugly old raven in our trap. Never mind, at least one is something. Can't expect too much of Lady Fortune, can we? After all, she sent you to the castle at just the right time. I recognized your ugly tortoise face at once, but you didn't even see me, did you?'

No, Fenoglio hadn't seen him. Should he have looked closely at every man standing behind the Adderhead? Yes – if you'd had your wits about you, Fenoglio, he told himself, that's exactly what you'd have done! How could you forget that Basta's back? Wasn't what happened to Mortimer warning enough?

'Well, what a surprise! Basta! How did you escape the Shadow?' he said out loud, moving unobtrusively backwards until he could feel the bed behind him. Ever since a man in the house next door had his throat cut in his sleep, he had slept with a knife under his pillow, although he wasn't sure if it was still there.

'Sorry, but he must have overlooked me, shut up in that cage as I was,' purred Basta in his catlike voice. 'Capricorn wasn't so lucky, but Mortola is still around, and she's told our old friend the Adderhead about the three birds we're after. Dangerous

sorcerers who kill with words.' Basta slowly came towards Fenoglio. 'Who do you think those birds are?'

The other man kicked the door shut with his boot.

'Mortola?' Fenoglio tried to make his voice mocking and supercilious, but it sounded more like the croak of a dying raven. 'Wasn't it Mortola who had you put in the cage to be fed to the Shadow?'

Basta just shrugged his shoulders and flung back his silver-grey cloak. Of course, he had his knife. A brand new one, it seemed, finer than any he'd ever had in the other world, and undoubtedly just as sharp.

'Yes, not very nice of her,' he said as his fingers caressed the handle of the knife. 'But she's *really* sorry. Come on, then, do you know what birds we're after? Let me help you a little. We've already wrung the neck of one of them – the one that sang loudest.'

Fenoglio let himself drop on to the bed, without – or so he hoped – any expression on his face. 'I assume you mean Mortimer,' he said, slowly pushing his hand under the pillow.

'Quite right!' Basta smiled. 'You should have been there when Mortola shot him – just the way she used to shoot the crows who stole the seed from her fields.' The memory made his smile even nastier. How well Fenoglio knew what was going on in his black heart! After all, he had made Basta up, just as he had made up Cosimo and his angelic smile. Basta had always liked describing his own and other people's abominable deeds in detail. His companion didn't seem to be so talkative. He was looking round Fenoglio's room with a bored expression. A good thing the glass man wasn't there; it was so easy to smash him.

'But we're not going to shoot you.' Basta came a little closer to Fenoglio, his face as intent as that of a stalking cat. 'We'll probably hang you until your tongue is sticking out of your poor old mouth.'

‘How very imaginative!’ said Fenoglio, moving his fingers further and further under the pillow. ‘But you know what will happen then. You’ll die too.’

Basta’s smile disappeared as suddenly as a mouse scurrying into its hole. ‘Oh yes!’ he hissed unpleasantly, as his hand instinctively went to the amulet at his throat. ‘I almost forgot. You believe you made me up, right? And what about him?’ He pointed to the other man. ‘That’s Slasher. Did you make him up too? He sometimes worked for Capricorn, after all. Many of the old fire-raisers wear the Adder’s silver now, although some of us think it was more fun under Capricorn. All those fine folk in the Castle of Night ...!’ He spat scornfully at Fenoglio’s feet. ‘It’s no coincidence that the Adderhead has a snake on his coat of arms. He wants you to crawl on your belly to him, that’s what our noble lord and master likes. But never mind, he pays well! Hey, Slasher!’ he addressed his still-silent companion. ‘What do you think, does the old fellow look as if he made you up?’

Slasher’s ugly face twisted. ‘If so, he made a bad job of it, eh?’

‘You’re right there.’ Basta laughed. ‘I’d say he deserves a taste of our knives just for the face he gave you, right?’

Slasher. Yes, indeed, he’d invented Slasher too. Fenoglio felt sick to his stomach when he remembered why he’d given the man that name.

‘Out with it, old man!’ Basta leaned so close that Fenoglio smelled his peppermint-scented breath. ‘Where’s the girl? Tell us and we may let you live a little longer. We’ll send the child after her father first. I’m sure she’s longing to see him. They were so fond of each other, those two. Come on, where is she? Spit it out!’ He slowly drew the knife from his belt. Its blade was long and slightly curved. Fenoglio swallowed as if to force down his fear. He pushed his hand yet further under the pillow, but all his fingertips met was a piece of bread, probably hidden there by Rosenquartz. Just as well, he thought. What good

would a knife have done? Basta would have run me through before I even got a proper hold on it, not to mention Slasher. He felt the sweat running into his eyes.

‘Hey, Basta, I know you like the sound of your own voice, but let’s get going and take him with us.’ Slasher spoke in croaking tones, like the toads in the hills by night. Of course, that was how Fenoglio had described him. Slasher, the man with the voice of a toad. ‘We can question him later. We have to follow the others now,’ he urged Basta. ‘Who knows what this dead prince will do next? Suppose he doesn’t let us out of his accursed gate? Suppose he sends his soldiers after us? The others must be miles ahead by now!’

With a regretful sigh, Basta put the knife back in his belt. ‘Yes, very well, you’re right,’ he said in surly tones. ‘I need to take my time with this sort of thing. Questioning people is an art, a real art.’ He roughly seized Fenoglio’s arm, pulled him to his feet and pushed him towards the door. ‘Just like old times, eh?’ he snarled in his ear. ‘I took you out of your own house once before, remember? Put on as good an act as you did then and you’ll go on breathing a little longer. And if we pass that woman feeding pigs in the yard, tell her we’re taking you to see an old girlfriend of yours, understand?’

Fenoglio just nodded. Minerva wouldn’t believe a word of it, but perhaps she might fetch help.

Basta’s hand was already on the door handle when footsteps came upstairs again. The old wood creaked and groaned. The children. For heaven’s sake! But it was not a child’s voice that spoke outside the door.

‘Inkweaver?’

Basta cast an anxious glance at Slasher, but Fenoglio had recognized the voice: it was Cloud-Dancer, the former tightrope-walker, who had brought him messages from the Black Prince many times before. He’d be no help, not with his

stiff leg! But what news brought him here? Had the Black Prince heard anything of Meggie?

Basta waved Slasher over to the left of the door, and stationed himself to the right. Then he gave Fenoglio a sign, and drew the knife from his belt again.

Fenoglio opened the door. It was so low that he always had to duck his head coming in. There stood Cloud-Dancer, rubbing his knee. 'Bloody stairs!' he swore. 'Steep and falling apart. I'm just glad you're in and I don't have to climb them again. Here.' He looked around as if the old house had ears, and reached into the leather bag that had carried so many letters from place to place. 'The girl who's staying with you sends you this.' He held out a piece of paper folded several times. It looked like a page from Meggie's notebook. Meggie hated to tear pages out of a book, and she'd have been reluctant to take one out of this notebook in particular; her father had bound it for her. So the message must be very important – and Basta would take it from him at once.

'Well, here you are, then!' Cloud-Dancer impatiently held the folded paper in front of his nose. 'Any idea how fast I hurried to bring you this?'

Reluctantly, Fenoglio put his hand out. He knew just one thing: Basta must not see Meggie's message. Never. His fingers closed around the paper so tightly that none of it was visible.

'And listen!' Cloud-Dancer went on quietly. 'The Adderhead has attacked the Secret Camp. Dustfinger—'

Fenoglio shook his head, almost imperceptibly. 'Fine. Thank you very much, but the fact is I have visitors just now,' he said, desperately trying to convey what he couldn't say in words with his eyes. He rolled them to right and left, as if they could act as fingers pointing to where Basta and Slasher were waiting behind the door.

Cloud-Dancer took a step back.

‘Run!’ cried Fenoglio, and leaped out of the doorway. Cloud-Dancer almost fell downstairs as Fenoglio made his way past him, but then he stumbled on. Fenoglio was sliding, rather than running, down the stairs. He didn’t turn until he had reached the bottom. He heard Basta cursing behind him, and Slasher’s croaking voice. He heard the children in the yard screaming with fright, and from somewhere came Minerva’s voice, but by then he was running past the sheds, and the lines where her freshly washed laundry hung. A pig ran between his legs, making him stumble and fall in the mud, and when he got up he saw that Cloud-Dancer hadn’t been as fast as he was. How could he be, with his stiff leg? Basta had taken him by the collar, while Slasher pushed Minerva aside as she tried to bar his way with a rake. Fenoglio ducked down, first behind an empty barrel, then behind the pigs’ trough, and crawled over to one of the sheds on all fours.

Despina.

She was staring at him in astonishment. He laid his finger on his lips, crawled on, forced his way past a couple of planks and squeezed into the place where Minerva’s children had their hideout. He only just fitted in – the place wasn’t meant for old men who were beginning to put on weight around the hips. The two children came here when they didn’t want to go to bed, or weren’t keen to work. They hadn’t shown their hiding place to anyone but Fenoglio, as proof of friendship – and in return for a good ghost story.

He heard Cloud-Dancer scream, he heard Basta roaring something and Minerva weeping. He almost crawled back to them, but fear paralyzed him. And what could he do against Basta’s knife and the sword that hung from Slasher’s belt? He leaned against the wooden wall of the shed, heard the pigs grunting and rooting about in the ground. Meggie’s message swam before his eyes; the sheet of paper was dirty with the mud he’d crawled through, but he could still decipher what she had written.

‘I don’t know!’ he heard Cloud-Dancer scream. ‘I don’t know what she wrote on it. I can’t read!’ Brave Cloud-Dancer. He probably did know, all the same. He usually had people tell him what their messages said.

‘But you can tell me where she is, can’t you?’ That was Basta’s voice. ‘Out with it. Is she with Dustfinger? You whispered his name to the old man!’

‘I don’t know!’ He screamed again, and Minerva wept louder than ever and shouted for help, her voice echoing back from the narrow houses.

‘The Adderhead’s men have taken them all away, my parents and the strolling players,’ Fenoglio read. ‘Dustfinger is following ... the Spelt-Mill ...’ The letters blurred as he looked at them. Yet again he heard screaming out there. He bit his knuckles so hard that they began to bleed. ‘Write something, Fenoglio. Save them. Write ...’ It was as if he could hear Meggie’s voice. Another scream. No. No, he couldn’t just sit here. He crawled out, on and on until he could rise to his feet.

Basta was still holding Cloud-Dancer in a firm grip, pressing him back against the wall of the house. The old tightrope-walker’s shirt was slit and bloody, and Slasher was standing in front of him with a knife in his hand. Where was Minerva? She was nowhere to be seen, but Despina and Ivo were there, in hiding near the sheds, watching what one man can do to another. With a smile on his lips.

‘Basta!’ Fenoglio took a step forward. He put all his rage and all his fear into his voice, and held Meggie’s close-written sheet of paper up in the air.

Basta turned with assumed surprise. ‘Oh, there you are!’ he called. ‘With the pigs. I might have known it. You’d better bring us that letter before Slasher finishes slicing up your friend here.’

‘You’ll have to fetch it yourselves.’

‘Why?’ Slasher laughed. ‘You can read it to us, can’t you?’

Yes. He could. Fenoglio stood there at his wits' end. Where were all the lies, the clever lies that usually sprang to his lips so easily? Cloud-Dancer was staring at him, his face twisted with pain and fear – and suddenly, as if he couldn't stand the fear a moment longer, he tore himself away from Basta and ran towards Fenoglio. He ran fast in spite of his stiff knee, but Basta's knife was faster – so much faster. It went straight into Cloud-Dancer's back, just as the Adderhead's arrow had pierced the gold-mocker's breast. The tightrope-walker fell in the mud, and Fenoglio, standing there, began to tremble. He was trembling so much that Meggie's letter slipped out of his hand and fluttered to the ground. But Cloud-Dancer lay there unmoving, his face in the dirt. Despina came out of hiding, hard as Ivo tried to haul her back, and stared wide-eyed at the motionless figure lying before Fenoglio's feet. It was quiet in the yard, very quiet.

'Read it out, scribbler!'

Fenoglio raised his head. Basta stood there in front of him, holding the knife that had been sticking into Cloud-Dancer's back just now. Fenoglio stared at the blood on the bright blade and at Meggie's message. In Basta's hand. Without thinking, he clenched his fists. He struck Basta in the chest as if neither the knife nor Slasher existed. Basta staggered back, anger and astonishment on his face. He fell over a bucket full of weeds that Minerva had been pulling out of her vegetable plots. Cursing, he got to his feet. 'Don't do that again, old man!' he spat. 'I'm telling you for the last time, read that out!'

But Fenoglio had snatched Minerva's pitchfork from the dirty straw piled up outside the pigsty. 'Murderer!' he whispered, pointing the crudely forged prongs at Basta. What had happened to his voice? 'Murderer, murderer!' he repeated, louder and louder, and he thrust the pitchfork at the place in Basta's breast where his black heart beat.

Basta retreated, his face distorted with rage.

‘Slasher!’ he roared. ‘Slasher, come here and get that damn fork away from him!’

But Slasher had gone beyond the houses, sword in hand, and was listening. Horses’ hooves were clattering along the alley outside. ‘We must go, Basta!’ he called. ‘Cosimo’s guards are on their way!’

Basta stared at Fenoglio, his narrowed eyes full of hate. ‘We’ll meet again, old man!’ he whispered. ‘And next time you’ll be lying in the dirt in front of me, like him.’ He stepped heedlessly over the motionless Cloud-Dancer. ‘As for this,’ he said, tucking Meggie’s letter under his belt, ‘Mortola will read it to me. Who’d have thought that the third little bird would write telling us where to find her in her own fair hand? And we’ll pick up the fire-eater for free into the bargain!’

‘Come on, quickly, Basta!’ Slasher beckoned impatiently.

‘What are you bothered about? You think they’ll string us up because there’s one less strolling player in the world?’ replied Basta calmly, but he turned away from Fenoglio. He waved to him one last time before disappearing among the houses.

Fenoglio thought he heard voices, the clink of weapons, but perhaps it was something else. He knelt down beside Cloud-Dancer, turned him gently on his back and put his ear to his chest – as if he hadn’t seen death in his face some moments ago. He sensed the two children coming up beside him. Despina put her hand on his shoulder. It was slim and light as a leaf.

‘Is he dead?’ she whispered.

‘You can see he is,’ said her brother.

‘Will the White Women come to fetch him now?’

Fenoglio shook his head. ‘No, he’s going to them of his own accord,’ he answered quietly. ‘You can see that. He’s gone already. But they’ll welcome him to their White Castle. It’s built of bones, but very beautiful. There’s a courtyard in that castle, full of fragrant flowers, with a tightrope made of moonlight

stretched across it just for Cloud-Dancer ...' The words came easily: beautiful, comforting words, but were they really true? Fenoglio didn't know. He had never taken any interest in what came after death, either in this world or the other one. Probably just silence, silence without a single word of comfort.

Minerva came stumbling back from the alley, a cut on her forehead. The physician who lived on the corner was with her, and two other women, their faces pale with fear. Despina ran to her mother, but Ivo stayed beside Fenoglio.

'No one would come.' Minerva sobbed as she fell to her knees beside the dead man. 'They were all afraid. Every one of them!'

'Cloud-Dancer,' murmured the physician. Boneknitter, he was often called, Stonecutter, Piss-Prophet, and sometimes, when he had lost a patient, Angel of Death. 'Only a week ago he was asking if I knew anything that would do the pain in his knee good.'

Fenoglio remembered seeing the physician with the Black Prince. Should he tell him what Cloud-Dancer had said about the Secret Camp? Could he trust him? No, it was better to trust no one. Nothing and no one. The Adderhead had many spies. Fenoglio straightened up. Never before had he felt so old, so very old that it seemed as if he couldn't survive another single day. The mill that Meggie had mentioned in her letter, where the devil was it? The name had sounded familiar ... well, of course it did; he himself had described it in one of the last chapters of *Inkheart*. The miller was no friend to the Adderhead, even though his mill stood near the Castle of Night, in a dark valley south of the Wayless Wood.

'Minerva,' he asked, 'how long does it take a mounted man to get from here to the Castle of Night?'

'Two days for sure, if he's not going to ruin his horse,' replied Minerva quietly.

Two days, if not less, before Basta found out what was in Meggie's letter. If he rode to the Castle of Night with it, that

was. But he's sure to do that, thought Fenoglio. Basta can't read, so he will take the letter to Mortola, and the Magpie is sure to be at the Castle of Night. Yes, there were probably two days to go before Mortola would read what Meggie had said and send Basta to the mill. Where Meggie might already be waiting ... Fenoglio sighed. Two days. Perhaps that would be enough to get a warning to her, but not to write the words she hoped he would send – words to save her parents.

Write something, Fenoglio. Write ...

As if it were so simple! Meggie, Cosimo, they all wanted words from him. It was easy for them to talk. You needed time to find the right words, and enough time was exactly what he didn't have!

'Minerva, tell Rosenquartz I have to go to the castle,' said Fenoglio. Suddenly he felt dreadfully tired. 'Tell him I'll fetch him later.'

Minerva stroked Despina's hair – the girl was sobbing into her skirt – and nodded. 'Yes, you go to the castle!' she said huskily. 'Go and tell Cosimo to send soldiers after those murderers. By God, I'll be in the front row to watch them hang!'

'Hang? What are you talking about?' The physician ran a hand through his sparse hair and looked sadly down at the dead man. 'Cloud-Dancer was one of the strolling players. No one gets hanged for stabbing a strolling player. There's a harsher penalty for killing a hare in the forest.'

Ivo looked incredulously at Fenoglio. 'Will they really not punish them?'

What was he to tell the boy? No, it was a fact. No one would punish them. Perhaps the Black Prince might some day, or the man who had taken to wearing the Bluejay's mask, but Cosimo wouldn't send a single soldier after Basta. The Motley Folk were all outlaws, in Lombrica and Argenta alike. Subject to none, protected by none. But Cosimo will give me a horseman if I ask him, thought Fenoglio, a fast horseman who can warn Meggie

of Basta. *'Write something, Fenoglio. Save them! Write something that will set them all free and kill the Adderhead ...'* Yes, by God, he would. He'd write rousing songs for Cosimo and powerful words for Meggie. And then her voice could help this story to find a good ending at last.



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No Hope

The mustard-pot got up and walked over to his plate on thin silver legs that waddled like the owl's ... 'Oh, I love the mustard-pot!' cried the Wart. 'Wherever did you get it?'

T.H. White,
The Sword in the Stone

Luckily Darius was a good cook, or Orpheus would probably have locked Elinor up in the cellar again after the very first meal and read himself food to eat out of her books. Thanks to Darius's cooking, however, they were able to spend time upstairs more often – although under the watchful eye of Sugar – for Orpheus liked his food, and plenty of it, and he enjoyed what Darius cooked.

Fearing that otherwise Orpheus might let only Darius upstairs, they pretended that Elinor had concocted all those delicacies with their appetizing aromas and Darius was just her assistant, tirelessly chopping, stirring and tasting; but as soon as Sugar, getting bored, left the kitchen to stare at the bookshelves, Darius took over the wooden spoon and Elinor the chopping – not that she was much better at chopping than cooking.

Now and then some bewildered figure, looking round as if lost, stumbled into the kitchen. Sometimes the visitor was human, sometimes furry or feathered; once it was even a talking mustard-pot. Elinor could usually work out, from the appearance of each one, which of her poor books Orpheus had in his pale hands at that moment. Tiny men with old-fashioned hairstyles were presumably from *Gulliver's Travels*. The mustard-pot was very probably from Merlin's cottage, and the enchanting and extremely confused faun who tripped in one lunchtime on delicate goat's hooves must come from Narnia.

Naturally Elinor wondered anxiously if all these creatures were in her library when they didn't happen to be standing glassy-eyed in the kitchen, and finally she asked Darius to go and find out, on the pretext of asking what Orpheus wanted to eat. He came back with the reassuring news that her Holy of Holies was still in dreadful disorder, but apart from Orpheus, his horrible dog, and a rather pale gentleman who looked to Darius suspiciously like the Canterville Ghost, no one was pawing, soiling, sniffing or otherwise damaging Elinor's books.

'Thank God!' she sighed, relieved. 'He obviously makes them all disappear again. I must say that appalling man really does know his trade. And it looks as if he can read them out of a book by now without making someone else disappear into it!'

'No doubt about that,' remarked Darius – and Elinor thought she heard a trace of envy in his gentle voice.

'He's a monster all the same,' she said, in a clumsy attempt to console him. 'It's just a pity this house is so well stocked with provisions, or he'd have had to send the wardrobe-man shopping, and then he'd be alone facing the two of us.'

As it was, however, days passed by, and there was nothing they could do about either their own imprisonment or the fact that Mortimer and Resa were probably in deadly danger. Elinor tried not even to think of Meggie. And Orpheus, the one person who could obviously have put everything right with such ease,

sat in her library like a pale, fat spider, playing with her books and the characters who populated them, as if they were toys to be taken out and put away again.

‘How much longer is he planning to go on like this, I ask myself?’ she said for about the hundredth time as Darius was putting rice in a serving dish – rice cooked just long enough, of course, so that it was soft but the grains were all separate. ‘Is he planning to keep us cooking and cleaning for him as unpaid servants for the rest of his life, while he amuses himself with my poor books? In *my* house?’

Darius did not reply. Instead, and without a word, he piled food on to four plates – this was a meal that certainly wasn’t going to send Orpheus out of the house.

‘Darius!’ whispered Elinor, putting a hand on his thin shoulder. ‘Won’t you just have a try? I know he always keeps the book close to him, but perhaps we can get our hands on it somehow. You could put something in his food ...’

‘He gets Sugar to taste everything he’s going to eat.’

‘Yes, I know. Right, so we must try something else, anything, and then you can read us into the book! If this repulsive creature won’t bring them out for us, then we’ll simply go after them!’

But Darius shook his head, as he had done every time Elinor had suggested the same thing, although in slightly different words. ‘I can’t do it, Elinor!’ he whispered, and his glasses clouded over, whether with the steam of cooking or tears rising to his eyes, she thought it better not to enquire. ‘I’ve never read anyone into a book, only out of it, and you know what happened then.’

‘Oh, all right, then read someone here, someone strong and heroic who’ll chase those two out of my house! Who cares if his nose has been flattened or he’s lost his voice like Resa, just so long as he has plenty of muscle!’

As if on cue, Sugar put his head round the door. Elinor was constantly amazed to see that it was not much wider than his neck. 'Orpheus wants to know where dinner is.'

'Just ready,' replied Darius, handing him one of the steaming plates.

'Rice again?' growled Sugar.

'Yes, sorry about that,' said Darius, as he pushed past him with Orpheus's plate.

'And you see about the dessert!' Sugar ordered Elinor as she was about to put the first forkful in her own mouth.

No, this just couldn't go on. Acting the kitchen-maid in her own house, with a horrible man in her library throwing her books on the floor, treating them like boxes of chocolates, nibbling something from one book here, another there.

There must be a way to do it, she thought, spooning walnut ice cream into two dishes with a gloomy expression on her face. *There must. There must.* Why couldn't her stupid brain work it out?

The Captives

‘Then you don’t think he’s dead, then?’

He put on his hat. ‘Now I may be wrong, of course, but I think he’s very alive. Shows all the symptoms of it. Go have a look at him, and when I come back we’ll get together and decide.’

**Harper Lee,
*To Kill a Mockingbird***

Night had fallen long ago when Meggie and Farid set out to follow Dustfinger. Go south, keep going south, Cloud-Dancer had told them, but how did you know you were going south when there was no sun to show you the way, no stars shining through the black leaves? The darkness seemed to have devoured everything: the trees, even the ground before their feet. Moths fluttered into their faces, attracted by the fire that Farid was nursing in his fingers like a little animal. The trees seemed to have eyes and hands, and the wind carried voices to their ears, soft voices whispering words to Meggie that she didn’t understand. On any other night a point would probably have come when she just stopped, or ran back to where Cloud-Dancer and Nettle might still be sitting by the fire; but tonight she knew only that she must find Dustfinger and her parents, for neither night nor the forest could hold any terrors for her

greater than the fear that had taken root in her heart when she saw Mo's blood on the straw.

At first, and with the fire to help him, Farid kept finding traces: a print left by one of Dustfinger's boots, a broken twig, a marten's trail ... but the time came when he stood there at a loss, not sure which way to go. Tree grew beside tree in the pale moonlight whichever way you looked, so close together that you couldn't make out any path between their trunks, and Meggie saw eyes: eyes above her, behind her, beside her ... hungry eyes, angry eyes, so many of them that she wished the moon wouldn't shine so brightly through the leaves.

'Farid!' she whispered. 'Let's climb a tree and wait for sunrise. We'll never find Dustfinger's trail again if we just go on like this.'

'My own opinion exactly!' Dustfinger appeared among the trees without a sound, as if he had been standing there for some time already. 'I've been able to hear you ploughing through the forest behind me like a herd of wild boar for the last hour,' he said, as Jink pushed past his legs. 'This is the Wayless Wood, and not the safest part of it either. You can think yourselves lucky I managed to convince the elves in the ash trees that you weren't breaking their branches just for fun. And how about the Night-Mares? Do you think they don't pick up your scent? If I hadn't sent them packing you'd probably be lying stiff as dead wood among the trees by now, caught in bad dreams like two flies in a spider's web.'

'Night-Mares?' whispered Farid, as the sparks at his fingertips went out. Night-Mares. Meggie came closer to him. She was remembering a story that Resa had told her. What a good thing it hadn't come into her mind earlier ...

'Yes, did I never tell you about them?' Jink ran to Dustfinger as he walked towards them, and greeted Gwin with a delighted chatter. 'They may not eat you alive like those desert ghosts

you kept telling me about, but they're not exactly friendly either.'

'I'm not going back,' said Meggie, looking at him resolutely. 'Whatever you say I'm not going back.'

Dustfinger looked at her. 'No, I know,' he said. 'Your mother all over.' That was all.

All night they followed the broad track left by the men-at-arms as they had marched through the forest – all night and the following day. Dustfinger let them stop for a brief rest only when he saw that Meggie was staggering with exhaustion. When the sun was once again so low in the sky that it touched the tree-tops they reached the crest of a hill, and Meggie saw the dark ribbon of a road running through the green of the forest down below. A collection of buildings stood beside it: a long, low house, with stables round a yard.

'The only inn close to the border,' Dustfinger whispered to them. 'They probably left their horses there. You can move considerably faster on foot in the forest. Everyone who wants to go south and down to the sea stops to rest at this inn: couriers, traders, even a few of the strolling players, though everyone knows that the landlord is one of the Adderhead's spies. If we're lucky we'll be there before the party we're following, because they won't be able to get down the slopes with the handcart and the prisoners. They'll have to go the long way round, but we can take the direct route and wait for them at the inn.'

'And then what?' For a moment Meggie thought she saw the same anxiety in his eyes that had driven her into the woods by night. But who was he anxious about? The Black Prince, the other strolling players ... her mother? She still clearly remembered that day in Capricorn's crypt when he had begged Resa to escape with him and leave her daughter behind....

Perhaps Dustfinger had remembered it too. 'Why are you looking at me like that?' he asked.

‘Oh, it’s nothing,’ she murmured, bending her head. ‘I’m just worried.’

‘And for good reason,’ he said, abruptly turning his back on her.

‘But what are we going to do when we’ve caught up with them?’ Farid was hurrying unsteadily after him.

‘I don’t know,’ Dustfinger said as he began looking for a way down the slope, keeping in the cover of the trees. ‘I thought one of you might have some idea, since you were so keen to come along.’

The route he took led downhill so steeply that Meggie could hardly keep her footing, but then she suddenly saw the road – stony, and rutted with channels where water had once flowed down from the hills. On the other side were the stables and the house she had seen from the top of the hill. Dustfinger waved her over to a place by the roadside where the undergrowth would shield her from curious eyes.

‘No, they don’t seem to be here yet, but they must arrive soon!’ he said quietly. ‘They may even stay the night, fill their bellies and get drunk to forget the terrors of the forest. I can’t show my face over there while it’s still light. Given my luck, one of Capricorn’s fire-raisers who’s working for the Adderhead now will cross my path. But you,’ he said, placing a hand on Farid’s shoulder, ‘you can go over there safely. If anyone asks where you’re from, just say your master’s sitting in the inn drinking. Count the soldiers, count the prisoners, and see how many children are among them. Understand? Meanwhile I’ll take a look further along the road. I have a kind of idea.’

Farid nodded, and lured Gwin over to him.

‘I’ll go with him!’ Meggie expected Dustfinger to forbid her to go with Farid, but he just shrugged his shoulders.

‘As you like. I can’t keep you here. I just hope your mother doesn’t give herself away when she recognizes you. And another thing!’ He took hold of Meggie’s arm as she was about

to follow Farid. 'Don't take it into your head that we can do anything for your parents. Perhaps we can free the children, even a few of the adults if they run fast enough. But your father won't be able to run, and your mother will stay with him. She won't leave him on his own, any more than she would leave you behind that other time. We both remember it, don't we?'

Meggie nodded and turned her face away, so that he wouldn't see her tears. But Dustfinger gently turned her round and wiped them from her cheeks. 'You really are very like your mother,' he said softly. 'She never wanted anyone to see her cry either – however good her reasons for tears.' His face looked strained as he scrutinized the two of them again 'Well, you're dirty enough,' he commented. 'Anyone would take you for a stable boy and a kitchen-maid. We'll meet behind the stables as soon as it's dark. Now, off you go.'

They didn't have long to wait.

Meggie and Farid had been hanging around the stables for barely an hour when they saw the procession of prisoners come down the road – women, children, old men, hands tied behind their backs and soldiers on both sides of them. These men were not armed, no helmets hid their sullen features, but they all wore their master's snake emblem on their breasts, silver-grey cloaks, and swords at their belts. Meggie recognized their leader at once: it was Firefox. And judging by his face, he didn't seem to like travelling on foot very much.

'Don't stare at them like that!' whispered Farid, as Meggie stood there rooted to the spot. He dragged her behind one of the carts standing around the yard. 'Your mother's not hurt. Did you see her?' Meggie nodded. Yes, Resa was walking between two other women, one of them pregnant. But where was Mo?

'Hey!' bellowed Firefox, as his men drove the prisoners into the yard. 'Whose are those carts? We need more room.'

The soldiers pushed the carts aside, handling one of them so roughly that its load of sacks slipped off. A man hurried out of the inn – probably the cart’s owner – a protest already on his lips, but when he saw the soldiers he bit it back and shouted at the grooms, who quickly righted the cart again. Traders, farmers, servants – more and more people came crowding out of the stables and the main building to see the cause of all the noise in the yard. A fat, perspiring man made his way through the turmoil to Firefox, faced him with a hostile expression, and let fly a torrent of angry words.

‘All right, all right!’ Meggie heard Firefox growl. ‘But we need space. Can’t you see we have prisoners with us? Would you rather we drove them into your stables?’

‘Yes, yes, use one of the stables!’ cried the fat man in relief, beckoning to a couple of his servants who were standing there staring at the prisoners, some of whom had fallen to their knees just where they were, their faces pale with exhaustion and fear.

‘Come on!’ Farid whispered to Meggie, and side by side they pushed their way past the muttering farmers and traders, past the servants still clearing the burst sacks out of the yard, past the soldiers casting hopeful glances at the inn. No one seemed to be taking very much notice of the prisoners, but it was hardly necessary: none of them looked as if they still had the strength to escape. Even the children, whose legs might have been fast enough for them to run, were clinging to their mothers’ skirts, empty-eyed, or staring in fear at the armed men who had brought them here. Resa was supporting the pregnant woman. Yes, her mother was uninjured; Meggie could see that much, although she avoided coming too close to her, in case Dustfinger was right to fear that Resa would give herself away if she recognized her. How desperately she was looking around! She took the arm of a soldier, whose beardless face made him look only a boy, and then—

‘Farid!’ Meggie couldn’t believe it. Resa was talking. Not with her hands, but with her mouth. Her voice could hardly be heard

in all this noise, but it *was* her voice. How could it be possible? The soldier didn't listen to her, but pushed her roughly away, and Resa turned. The Black Prince and his bear were pulling a cart into the yard. They had been harnessed to it like oxen. A chain was wound around the bear's black muzzle, another round his throat and chest. But Resa had eyes for neither the bear nor the Prince – she kept looking at the cart, and Meggie immediately realized what that meant.

Without a word, she took off. 'Meggie!' Farid called after her, but she wasn't listening. No one could stop her. The cart was a ramshackle thing. First she saw only the man with the injured leg, one of the strolling players holding a child on his lap. Then she saw Mo.

She thought her heart would never beat again. He was lying there with his eyes closed, under a dirty blanket, but all the same Meggie saw the blood. His shirt was soaked in it, the shirt he liked best to wear, although the sleeves had worn thin. Meggie forgot everything: Farid, the soldiers, Dustfinger's warning, where she was, why she was here. She just stared at her father and his still face. The world was suddenly an empty place, very empty, and her heart was a cold, dead thing.

'Meggie!' Farid reached for her arm. He hauled her away with him, ignoring her resistance, and held her close when she began to sob.

'He's dead, Farid! Did you see him? Mo ... he's dead!' She kept stammering that terrible word. Dead. Gone. For ever.

She pushed Farid's arm away. 'I must go to him.' *Bad luck clings to this book, Meggie, nothing but bad luck, even if you don't believe me.* Hadn't he told her that in Elinor's library? How much every one of those words hurt now. Death had been waiting in the book. His death.

'Meggie!' Farid was still holding her firmly. He shook her as if he had to wake her up. 'Meggie, listen. He's not dead! Do you think they'd be dragging him along with them if he was?'

Would they? She wasn't sure of anything any more.

'Come with me. Come on!' Farid pulled her away with him. He pushed his way casually through the crowd, as if none of the hurry and bustle interested him. Finally, with an indifferent expression on his face, he stopped by the stable into which the soldiers were herding the prisoners. Meggie wiped away her tears and tried to look equally indifferent, but how could she when her heart, coming back to life, felt as if someone had cut it in two?

'Do you have enough for us to eat there?' she heard Firefox ask. 'We're ravenous after our journey through that accursed forest.'

Meggie saw them push Resa into the dark stable with the other women, while two soldiers released the Black Prince and his bear.

'Of course I have enough!' said the fat landlord indignantly. 'And you won't recognize your horses, their coats are so glossy!'

'So I should hope,' replied Firefox. 'Otherwise the Adderhead will make sure you're not landlord of this hovel much longer. We ride at daybreak tomorrow. My men and the prisoners can stay in the stable, but I want a bed – and a bed to myself, too, not one I have to share with a crowd of snoring, farting strangers.'

'Of course, of course!' The landlord nodded eagerly. 'But what about that monster?' He pointed anxiously at the bear. 'He'll scare the horses. Why didn't you kill him and leave him in the forest?'

'Because the Adderhead wants to hang him along with his master,' replied Firefox, 'and because my men believe all the nonsense they hear about him – folk say he's a Night-Mare who likes to take the shape of a bear, so it's a bad idea to fire an arrow into his coat.'

'A Night-Mare?' The landlord chuckled nervously. He obviously seemed to think the story not impossible. 'Never

mind what he is, he's not going into my stable. Tie him up behind the bakehouse if you like. Then perhaps the horses won't smell him.' The bear growled in a low tone as one of the soldiers pulled him along on his chain, but as they were forced away behind the main building the Black Prince spoke to him soothingly, in a quiet voice, as if comforting a child.

The cart with Mo and the injured old man on it was still in the yard. A few servants were standing around, gossiping to each other, presumably trying to work out exactly who had been captured on the Adderhead's orders. Was the rumour already spreading that the man lying as if dead on the cart was the Bluejay? The soldier with the beardless face shooed the servants away, took the child off the cart and pushed him towards the stable too. 'What about the wounded prisoners?' he called to Firefox. 'Do we just leave those two on the cart where they are?'

'And find that they're dead in the morning, or gone? What are you thinking of, you fool? One of them's the reason why we went into that damned forest, right?' Firefox turned to the landlord again. 'Is there a physician among your guests?' he asked. 'I have a prisoner who must be kept alive because the Adderhead plans a magnificent execution for him. It's no real fun with a dead man, if you see what I mean.'

Must be kept alive ... Farid pressed Meggie's hand and smiled triumphantly at her.

'Oh yes, of course, of course!' The landlord looked curiously at the cart. 'It's a nuisance, for sure, if condemned men die before their execution. I hear that's happened twice this year already. However, I can't offer you a physician. I do have a moss-woman helping out in the kitchen, though. She's set many of my guests to rights in her time.'

'Good! Send for her!'

The landlord impatiently beckoned to a boy leaning by the stable door. Firefox called two of his soldiers to him. 'Go on, get

the wounded men into the stable too!’ Meggie heard him say. ‘Double guards outside the door, and four of you keep watch on the Bluejay tonight, understand? No wine, no mead, and anyone who falls asleep will be sorry for it!’

‘The Bluejay?’ The landlord stared in amazement. ‘You have the Bluejay on that cart?’ When Firefox cast him a warning glance, he quickly put his fat fingers to his mouth. ‘Not a word!’ he uttered. ‘No one will hear a word of it from me.’

‘I should hope not,’ growled Firefox, and looked around as if to make sure that no one else had heard what he said.

When the soldiers lifted Mo off the cart, Meggie instinctively took a step forward, but Farid dragged her back. ‘Meggie, what’s the matter with you?’ he hissed. ‘If you carry on like this they’ll shut you up too. Do you think that will help anyone?’

Meggie shook her head. ‘He really is still alive, Farid, isn’t he?’ she whispered. She was almost afraid to believe it.

‘Yes, of course. I told you so. Don’t look so sad. Everything will turn out all right, you wait and see!’ Farid caressed her forehead and kissed the tears from her eyelashes.

‘Hey, you two lovebirds, get away from the horses!’

The Piper was standing before them. Meggie bent her head, although she was sure he wouldn’t recognize her. She had been just a girl in a dirty dress when he almost rode her down in Ombra market place. Today he was once again more splendidly clothed than any of the strolling players Meggie had yet seen. His silken garments shimmered like a peacock’s tail, and the rings on his fingers were genuine silver, like the nose on his face. Obviously the Adderhead paid well for songs that pleased him.

The Piper looked hard at them again, and then strolled over to Firefox. ‘Well, so you’re back from the forest!’ he called from some way off. ‘And with rich booty, so I’ve heard. Looks as if one of your spies wasn’t lying for a change. Good news for the Adderhead at last.’

Firefox replied, but Meggie wasn't listening. The snotty-nosed boy came back with the moss-woman, a short little creature who hardly came up to his shoulder. Her skin was grey as beech-bark, her face as wrinkled as a shrivelled apple. Moss-women, healers ... before Farid realized what she meant to do, Meggie had slipped away from him. The moss-woman would know how Mo really was. She made her way as close as she could to the little woman, until only the boy stood between them. The moss-woman's smock was stained with meat-juices from the spit, and her feet were bare, but she inspected the men standing around her with fearless eyes.

'Sure as I live, a genuine moss-woman,' growled Firefox, while his men retreated from the tiny woman as if she were as dangerous as the Black Prince's bear. 'I thought they never came out of the forest. But yes, apparently they know something about healing. Don't folk say that old witch Nettle's mother was a moss-woman?'

'Yes, but her father was useless.' The little woman scrutinized Firefox as intently as if she were trying to find out what kind of blood flowed in his veins. 'You drink too much,' she observed. 'Just look at your face. Carry on like this and your liver will soon burst like an over-ripe pumpkin.'

A ripple of laughter ran through the onlookers, but a glance from Firefox silenced them. 'Listen, you're not here to give me advice, she-gnome!' he snapped at the moss-woman. 'I want you to look at one of my prisoners. He has to reach the Adderhead's castle alive.'

'Yes, I know all that,' replied the moss-woman, still examining his face with disapproval. 'So that your master can kill him by all the rules of the executioner's trade. Fetch me water. Hot water and clean towels. And I want someone to help me.'

Firefox nodded to the boy. 'If you want a helper, pick one for yourself,' he growled, and surreptitiously felt his stomach,

where he presumably supposed his liver was located.

‘One of your men? No, thank you.’ The moss-woman wrinkled up her little nose scornfully, and looked around until her eye fell on Meggie. ‘That one will do,’ said the little creature. ‘She doesn’t look too stupid.’

And before Meggie knew it, one of the soldiers took her roughly by the shoulder. The last thing she saw before she stumbled into the stable after the moss-woman was the expression of alarm on Farid’s face.



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A Familiar Face

Believe me. Sometimes when life looks to be at its grimmest, there's a light hidden at the heart of things.

**Clive Barker,
*Abarat***

Mo was conscious as the moss-woman knelt down beside him. He sat leaning back against the damp wall, his eyes searching all the prisoners crouching in the dimly lit stable, looking for Resa's face. He didn't see Meggie until the little woman impatiently beckoned her over. Of course he realized at once that even a smile would have given her away, but it was so hard for him not to take her in his arms, so hard to hide the joy and fear that struggled for his heart at the sight of her.

'What are you standing around for?' the old woman snapped at Meggie. 'Come here, you stupid thing!' Mo could have shaken her, but Meggie just knelt down quickly beside her and took the blood-stained bandages that the old woman was none too gently cutting away from his chest. Don't stare at her, thought Mo, forcing his eyes to look anywhere else: at the old woman's hands, at the other prisoners, not at his daughter. Had Resa seen her too? She's all right, he thought. Yes, definitely. She wasn't any thinner than usual, and she didn't seem to be

sick or injured either. If only he could at least have exchanged a word with her!

‘By fairy-spit, what’s the matter with you?’ asked the little woman roughly as Meggie almost spilled the water she was handing her. ‘I might just as well have taken one of the soldiers.’ She began feeling Mo’s injuries with her bark-like fingers. It hurt, but he clenched his teeth so that Meggie wouldn’t notice.

‘Are you always so hard on her?’ he asked the old woman.

The little moss-woman muttered something incomprehensible without looking at him, but Meggie ventured a quick glance, and he smiled at her, hoping she wouldn’t notice the concern in his eyes, his alarm at seeing her again in this of all places, among all the soldiers. *Be careful, Meggie*, he tried to tell her with his eyes. How her lips were quivering, probably with all the words that she couldn’t say aloud, any more than he could! But it was so good to see her. Even in this place. In all those days and nights of fever, he had so often felt sure that he would never see her face again!

‘Hurry up, can’t you?’ Suddenly Firefox was standing right behind Meggie, and at the sound of his voice she quickly bowed her head and held the bowl of water out to the little old woman again.

‘This is a nasty wound!’ remarked the moss-woman. ‘I’m surprised you’re still alive.’

‘Yes, strange, isn’t it?’ Mo was as much aware of Meggie’s glance as if it were the pressure of her hand. ‘Perhaps the fairies whispered a few words of healing in my ear.’

‘Words of healing?’ The moss-woman wrinkled up her nose. ‘What kind of words would those be? Fairies’ gossip is as stupid and useless as fairies themselves.’

‘Well, then someone else must have whispered them to me.’

Mo saw how pale Meggie turned as she helped the moss-woman to re-bandage his wound, the wound that hadn't killed him. It's nothing, Meggie, he wanted to say, I'm fine – but all he could do was look at her again, only in passing, as if her face meant no more to him than any other.

'Believe it or not,' he told the old woman, 'I did hear the words. Beautiful words. At first I thought it was my wife's voice, but then I realized it was my daughter's. I heard her voice as clearly as if she were sitting here beside me.'

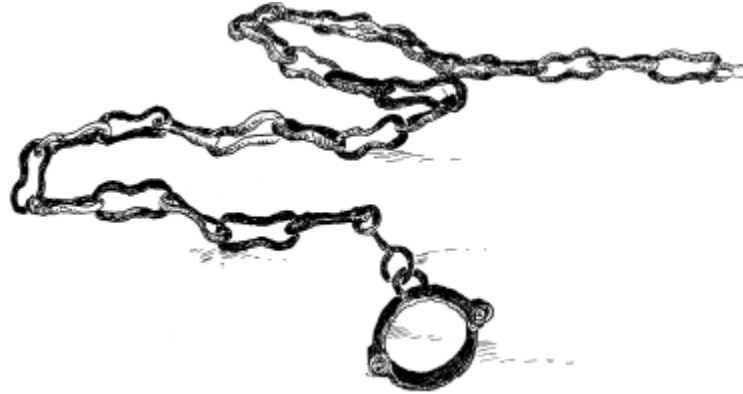
'Yes, yes, folk hear all kinds of things in a fever!' replied the moss-woman brusquely. 'I've heard of those who swore the dead spoke to them. The dead, angels, demons ... a fever will summon up whole troops of them.' She turned to Firefox. 'I have an ointment that will help him,' she said, 'and I'll brew up something for him to drink. I can't do any more.' When she turned her back on them, Meggie quickly put her hand on Mo's fingers. No one noticed, nor did they notice the gentle pressure he gave her hand in return. He smiled at her again, and only when the moss-woman turned again did he quickly look aside. 'You ought to look at his leg too!' he said, nodded towards the strolling player lying asleep beside him on the straw, exhausted.

'No, she oughtn't!' Firefox interrupted. 'It's all one to me whether he lives or dies. You're different.'

'Oh, I see! You still think I'm that robber.' Mo leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes for a moment. 'I suppose it's no good if I tell you yet again that I'm not?'

By way of answer, Firefox just cast him a contemptuous glance. 'Tell the Adderhead. Perhaps he'll believe you,' he said. Then he pulled Meggie roughly to her feet. 'Go on, off with you both! That'll do!' he shouted at her and the moss-woman. His men pushed them both towards the stable door. Meggie tried to look round again, her eyes searching for her mother, sitting somewhere among the other prisoners, and looking towards Mo yet again, but Firefox grabbed her arm and forced her out of

the door – leaving Mo wishing he had words at his command, words like those that had killed Capricorn. His tongue longed to taste them, longed to send them after Firefox and see him fall in the dust like his former master. But there was no one here to write the words for him. Only Fenoglio's story was everywhere, surrounding them with horror and darkness – and presumably his own death was already planned for one of the next chapters.



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Paper and Fire

‘Good, well, if that’s decided,’ came a weary voice from the opposite end of the dank hold. It was the gnokgoblin, still manacled and quite forgotten. ‘Then will someone please release *me*.’

**Paul Stewart,
*Midnight Over Sanctaphrax***

Dustfinger saw the windows of the inn glowing like dirty yellow eyes as he stole across the road. Jink scurried ahead of him, little more than a shadow in the darkness. There was no moon tonight, and it was so dark in the yard and around the stables that even his own scarred face would just look like a pale patch.

There were guards outside the stable where the prisoners had been shut up, four guards, but they didn’t notice him. They were staring into the night, their faces bored, hands on their sword hilts, looking longingly again and again at the lighted windows opposite. Loud, drunken voices came from the inn – and then the sound of a lute, its strings well plucked, followed by singing in a curiously strained voice. Ah, so the Piper was back from Ombra too, and singing one of his songs, drunk with blood and the intoxication of killing. The presence of the man with the silver nose was yet another reason why he had to stay

out of sight. Meggie and Farid were waiting behind the stables, as agreed, but they were arguing in such loud voices that Dustfinger came up behind the boy and put his hand over his mouth.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ he said angrily, his voice low. ‘Do you want them to put you two in with the others?’

Meggie bowed her head. She had tears in her eyes again.

‘She wants to go into the stable!’ Farid whispered. ‘She thinks they’ll all be asleep! As if—’

Dustfinger closed the boy’s mouth with his hand again. Voices rang out over the yard. Obviously someone had brought the guards outside the stable something to eat. ‘Where’s the Black Prince?’ he whispered, when all was still again.

‘Between the bakehouse and the main building. Tell her she can’t go back into that stable! There are at least fifteen soldiers in there.’

‘How many guarding the Prince?’

‘Three.’

Three. Dustfinger glanced up at the sky. No moon. It was hidden behind the clouds, and the darkness was black as a cloak.

‘Are you going to free him? Three aren’t many!’ Farid sounded excited. Not a trace of fear in his voice. That fearlessness would be the death of him yet. ‘We can cut their throats before they make a sound. It’ll be easy.’ He often said such things. Dustfinger kept wondering if it was just talk, or if he’d actually done something of the kind in the past.

‘I can tell you’re ready for anything!’ he said softly. ‘But you know very well I’m no good at cutting throats. How many prisoners are there?’

‘Eleven women, three children, nine men not counting Silvertongue.’

‘How is he?’ Dustfinger looked at Meggie. ‘Have you seen him? Can he walk?’

She shook her head.

‘What about your mother?’ She cast him a quick glance. She didn’t like it when he mentioned Resa. ‘Come on, is she all right?’

‘I think so.’ She put one hand to the stable wall, as if she could feel her parents behind it. ‘But I didn’t get a chance to talk to her. Please!’ How pleadingly she was looking at him! ‘I’m sure they’re all asleep. I’ll be very careful!’

Farid cast a despairing glance up at the stars, as if such stupidity would make them break their eternal silence.

‘The guards won’t sleep,’ said Dustfinger. ‘So think up a good lie for them. Do you have anything to write with?’

Meggie looked at him incredulously, and for a moment Dustfinger saw her mother’s eyes. Then she quickly put her hand into the bag that she carried with her. ‘I have some paper with me,’ she whispered, hastily tearing a page out of her little marbled notebook.

Like mother, like daughter. Never without the means of writing.

‘You’re letting her do it?’ Farid looked at him in astonishment.

‘Yes.’

Meggie looked at him expectantly.

‘Write that there’ll be a fallen tree lying across the road they take tomorrow. When it catches fire, everyone strong and young enough must run into the forest to the left. To the left: that’s important! Write that we’ll be waiting there to hide them. Did you get that down?’

Meggie nodded. Her pencil hurried over the paper. He could only hope that Resa would be able to decipher the tiny

handwriting in the darkness of the stable, because he wouldn't be there to make fire for her.

'Have you thought what you're going to tell the guards?' he asked.

Meggie nodded. For a moment she looked almost like the little girl she had still been not much more than a year ago, and Dustfinger wondered whether it was a mistake, after all, to let her go – but before he could change his mind she was off. She raced over the yard and disappeared into the inn. When she came back, she was carrying a jug.

'Please, the moss-woman sent me!' they heard her clear voice telling the guards. 'I'm to take the children milk.'

'Look at that. Clever as a jackal!' whispered Farid as the guards moved aside. 'And brave as a lioness.' There was so much admiration in his voice that Dustfinger couldn't help smiling. The boy was definitely in love.

'Yes, she's probably cleverer than both of us put together,' he whispered back. 'And certainly braver, at least as far as I'm concerned.'

Farid just nodded. He was staring at the open stable door – and smiled with relief when Meggie came out again.

'See that?' she whispered to him when she was back beside Farid. 'It was perfectly easy.'

'Good!' said Dustfinger, beckoning Farid over to his side.

'Then let's cross our fingers and hope that what we have to do now is as easy. What about it, Farid? Do you feel like playing with fire?'

The boy carried out his task with as cool a head as Meggie. Apparently lost to the world, but in a spot where the men guarding the Prince had a clear view of him, he began making fire dance as naturally as if he were standing in some peaceful market place, not in front of an inn which sheltered Firefox and

the Piper. The guards nudged each other, laughed, glad of something to pass the time this sleepless night. Seems that I'm the only one here whose heart is beating faster, thought Dustfinger as he stole past heaps of stinking offal and rotting vegetables. It looked as if the fat landlord's cooks simply threw everything they couldn't serve to the guests out here behind the house. A few rats scurried off when they heard Dustfinger's footsteps, and the hungry eyes of a brownie glowed among the bushes. They had tied the Prince up next to a mountain of carcasses, and his bear just far enough away to keep him from reaching the bones. He squatted there, snorting unhappily through his muzzle, which was bound, now and then uttering a miserably muted howl.

The guards had stuck a torch in the ground not far away, but the flame went out at once when the wind carried Dustfinger's quiet voice to it. Nothing was left but a faint glow – and the Black Prince raised his head. He knew at once who must be slinking around in the dark when the fire so suddenly died down. A few more quick and silent steps, and Dustfinger took cover behind the bear's furry back.

'That boy's really good!' whispered the Prince, without turning round. A sharp knife would soon deal with the ropes binding him.

'Yes, very good. And afraid of nothing, unlike me.' Dustfinger examined the padlocks on the bear's chains. They were rusty, but not particularly difficult to open. 'What do you say to a little walk in the forest? But the bear must be quiet, quiet as an owl. Can he do it?' He ducked when one of the guards turned, but the man had obviously just heard the maid who was coming out of the kitchen to tip a bucket of refuse on to the garbage heaps behind the building. She disappeared again, with a curious look at the bound Prince – and took with her the noise that had come spilling out of the doorway.

'What about the others?'

‘Four guards outside the stable, another four off told by Firefox to guard Silvertongue, and there must be ten more guarding the other prisoners. It’s unlikely that we can distract the attention of all of them, certainly not for long enough to get the injured and crippled to safety.’

‘Silvertongue?’

‘Yes, the man they were looking for in your camp. What do you call him?’ A padlock sprang open. The bear growled; perhaps Jink was making him uneasy. The second chain had better stay where it was for now, or he’d probably eat the marten. Dustfinger set about cutting the ropes tying up the Black Prince. He had to hurry, for they must be gone before Farid’s arms tired. The second padlock clicked. Another quick glance at the boy ... by the fire of the elves! thought Dustfinger. He throws the torches almost as high as I do now! But just as the Prince was throwing off his ropes, a fat man marched up to Farid with a maid and a soldier behind him. He shouted at the boy and pointed indignantly to the flames. Farid just smiled, skipped back while Gwin leaped around his legs, and went on juggling the burning torches. Oh yes, he was as clever as Meggie! Dustfinger signed to the Prince to go with him. The bear groped his way along after them, following his master’s low voice. A pity he really was only a bear and not a Night-Mare. There’d have been no need to tell one of those to keep quiet. But at least he was black, and the night swallowed them up as if they were a part of it.

‘We’ll meet down on the road by the fallen tree.’ The Prince nodded, and disappeared into the darkness. As for Dustfinger, he set off in search of the boy and Resa’s daughter.

The soldiers were all shouting in confusion in the yard now it was clear that the Black Prince had escaped; even the Piper had come out of the inn. But neither Farid nor the girl could be seen. The soldiers began searching the outskirts of the forest and the slope behind the house, carrying torches. Dustfinger whispered words into the night until the fire felt sleepy, and

torch after torch was extinguished as if the slight breeze had blown them out. The men stopped in the middle of the road, feeling uneasy, and looked around with eyes full of fear – fear of the dark, fear of the bear, fear of everything else that roamed the woods by night.

None of them dared go as far as the place where the fallen tree was blocking the road. The forest and the hills were as quiet as if no human foot had ever trodden there. Gwin was perched on the tree-trunk, and Farid and Meggie were waiting on the other side under the trees. The boy had a bleeding lip, and the girl had laid her head wearily against his shoulder. Embarrassed, she straightened up as Dustfinger emerged in front of them.

‘Is he free?’ asked Farid.

Dustfinger put a hand under his chin and looked at the split lip. ‘Yes. Whatever happens tomorrow, the Prince and his bear will lend us a hand. How did you do that?’ The two martens scurried past him and disappeared into the forest side by side.

‘Oh, it’s nothing. One of the soldiers tried to grab me, but I got away. Well, tell me, was I good?’ As if he didn’t know the answer.

‘So good that I’m beginning to worry. If you carry on like this I’ll soon be out of a job.’

Farid smiled. How sad Meggie looked, though. She seemed as lost as the child they had found in the looted camp. It wasn’t difficult to imagine how she was feeling, even if, like Dustfinger himself, you had never known your parents. Acrobats, some of the women among the strolling players, a travelling physician ... he had had many substitutes for them. Any of the Motley Folk who looked after abandoned children were like their parents. Well, say something to her, Dustfinger, anything, he thought. You often used to cheer her mother up. Though usually it was just for a short time ... stolen time.

‘Listen.’ He knelt down in front of Meggie and looked at her. ‘If we really manage to free some of them tomorrow, the Black Prince will take them to safety – but the three of us will follow the others.’

She looked at him as distrustfully as if he were a worn tightrope that she must walk high in the air.

‘Why?’ she asked quietly. When she spoke in a low tone you didn’t guess at the power that her voice could exert. ‘Why do you want to help them?’ She didn’t have to spell it out: *last time you didn’t. Back in Capricorn’s village.* What could he say? That it was easier to stand by and watch in a strange world than in your own?

‘Let’s say I may have something to make up for,’ he said at last. He knew he didn’t have to explain what he meant. They both remembered that night, in another tale, when he had betrayed her to Capricorn. And there’s something else too, he almost added, I think your mother has been a captive long enough. But he didn’t say that. He knew that Meggie wouldn’t have liked it.

A good hour later the Black Prince joined them, uninjured and with his bear.



The Burning Tree

Do you see the tongues of fire
Darting, flickering higher and higher?
Do you see the flames all dancing,
Flaring, off the dry wood glancing?

James Krüss,
Fire

Resa's feet were bleeding. The road was stony, and wet with the morning dew. They all had their hands bound again, except the children. She had been terrified that the soldiers wouldn't let them walk with the other prisoners, but would load them on to the cart instead. 'Cry if they try to make you get up there!' she had whispered to the little ones. 'Cry and scream until they let you walk with us.' But luckily that hadn't been necessary. How scared the three children looked – two girls and a boy, not counting the baby still inside Mina's belly.

The elder girl, who was just six, was walking between Resa and Mina. Whenever Resa glanced at her she wondered what Meggie had looked like at that age. Mo had shown her photographs, wonderful photographs taken in all the years she herself had missed, but those weren't her own memories but his. And Meggie's.

Brave Meggie. Resa's heart still contracted when she remembered how her daughter had passed her the sheet of paper in the stable. Where was she now? Was she watching them from somewhere in the forest?

Only when the hue and cry over the Black Prince had broken out had she been able to read the note, by the light of the torch left burning overnight in the stable. None of the others could read, so she had been able to pass on Dustfinger's news to the women sitting near her only in whispers. After that, there had been no chance to tell the men too, but the ones who could walk would run anyway. Resa was to look after the children, and they knew what they were to do.

The other girl and the boy were walking between their mother and the woman with claw-like fingers who had wanted to take Mo back to Capricorn's fortress. Resa had said nothing to her about Dustfinger's news, and every glance the woman cast her said: *I was right, too!* But Mina smiled when she looked at Resa, Mina with her round belly, who could have thought she had good reason to hate her for what had happened. Perhaps the flowers she gave Resa in the cave really had brought luck. Mo was better, much better – after she had thought for so many endless hours that every breath he drew would be his last. Now that the Prince had escaped, a horse was pulling the cart with Mo on it. The bear had set the Prince free, they whispered, which finally proved that he was indeed a Night-Mare. His ghostly glance had made the chains disappear, and he had turned himself into a human being and cut his master's bonds. Resa wondered whether that human being had a scarred face.

When all the noise had begun in the night she had been so scared for Dustfinger, Meggie and the boy, but next morning the fury on the soldiers' faces told her that they had got away.

But where was the fallen tree Meggie had mentioned in her note?

The little girl beside her was clinging to her dress. Resa smiled at the child – and sensed the Piper looking down at her from his horse. She quickly turned her head away. Luckily neither he nor Firefox had recognized her. She had often enough listened to the Piper's bloodthirsty songs in Capricorn's fortress – the minstrel still had a human nose on his face in those days – and she had polished Firefox's boots, but fortunately he had not been one of those who chased her and the other maids.

Up above the prisoners' heads the soldiers were describing, at the tops of their voices, what their master would do to the Black Prince once he'd caught him and his enchanted bear again. Now that they were on horseback once more their tempers had clearly improved. From time to time the Piper turned in his saddle and contributed some particularly cruel idea. Resa would have liked to put her hands over the ears of the little girl beside her. The child's mother was not among the prisoners, but was wandering the country with some of the other strolling players, happy in the belief that her daughter was safe in the Secret Camp.

The girl would run. So would the other children with their mother. The claw-fingered woman would probably try to escape too, and Sootbird and most of the other men. The minstrel with the injured leg who was on the cart with Mo would stay, like Twofingers, because he was afraid of the soldiers' crossbows, and so would the old stilt-walker, who no longer trusted his legs. Benedicta, who could hardly see where she was going, would stay behind too, and Mina, whose child would soon be coming into the world ... and Mo.

The road went ever more steeply downhill. Overhead, the branches of the trees were intertwined. It was a still, windless morning, cloudy and damp, but Dustfinger's fires burned even in rain. Resa peered past the horses. How close together the trees stood, nothing but darkness showing between them even in broad daylight. The plan was for them to run to the left. Did

Meggie expect her to try and escape too? How often she had asked herself that – and she always came to the same conclusion: no, Meggie knows that I won't leave her father alone. She loves him just as much.

Resa's pace slowed. There it was, the fallen tree, its trunk green with moss. The little girl looked up at her, wide-eyed. They had feared that one of the children would talk, but they had been silent as the grave all morning.

Firefox swore when he saw the tree. He reined in his horse, and told the first four horsemen to dismount and clear the obstacle out of the way. They obeyed, looking sullen, handed their horses' reins to other men and strode towards the tree-trunk. Resa dared not look at the roadside, for fear that any glance of hers might give Dustfinger or Meggie away. She thought she heard fingers snapping, and then a whisper, barely audible. Not human words, but fire-words. Dustfinger had once spoken them for her in the other world, where they didn't work, where fire was deaf and dumb. 'They sound much better when I say them there,' he had said, and he told her about the fire-honey he took from the elves. She remembered the sound very well, all the same – as if flames were biting their way through black coal, as if they were hungrily devouring white paper. No one else heard the whisper through the rustle of the leaves, the steady rain, the twittering of birds and the chirping of crickets.

The fire licked up from beneath the bark of the tree like a nest full of snakes. The men didn't notice. Only when the first flame shot up, hot and greedy, rising so high that it almost brought down the leaves of the trees, did they stumble back in alarm and disbelief. The riderless horses reared and tried to break free as the fire hissed and danced.

'Run!' whispered Resa, and the little girl ran for it, fleet-footed as a fawn. Children, women, men, they all ran towards the trees – Sootbird, the claw-fingered woman – past the shying horses they ran, and into the shelter of the dark forest. Two

soldiers shot arrows after them, but their own horses were rearing in fear of the fire, and the arrows buried themselves in the bark of trees instead of in human flesh. Resa saw fugitive after fugitive disappear among the trees while the soldiers shouted at each other, and it hurt her to stay standing there; it hurt badly.

The tree went on burning, its bark turned black ... *run*, thought Resa, *run, all of you!* But she herself still stood there although her feet longed to run too, run away, run to her daughter waiting somewhere in the trees. Yet she stayed there. She stood still. There was just one thing she must not think of: that they would shut her up again. For if she did, she would run in spite of Mo. She'd run and run and never stop again. She had been a prisoner too long, she had lived on nothing but memories too long, memories of Mo, memories of Meggie ... she had fed on them all those years when she served first Mortola, then Capricorn.

'Don't get any silly ideas, Bluejay!' she heard one of the soldiers call back. 'Or I'll put an arrow through you!'

'What kind of ideas did you have in mind?' replied Mo. 'Do I look stupid enough to run away from your crossbow?' She could almost have laughed. He'd always been able to make her laugh so easily.

'What are you waiting for? Fetch them back!' roared the Piper. His silver nose had slipped out of place, and his horse was still shying hard as he pulled on the reins. Some of the men obeyed, stumbling half-heartedly into the forest, but retreating again as a shadow stirred in the undergrowth, growling.

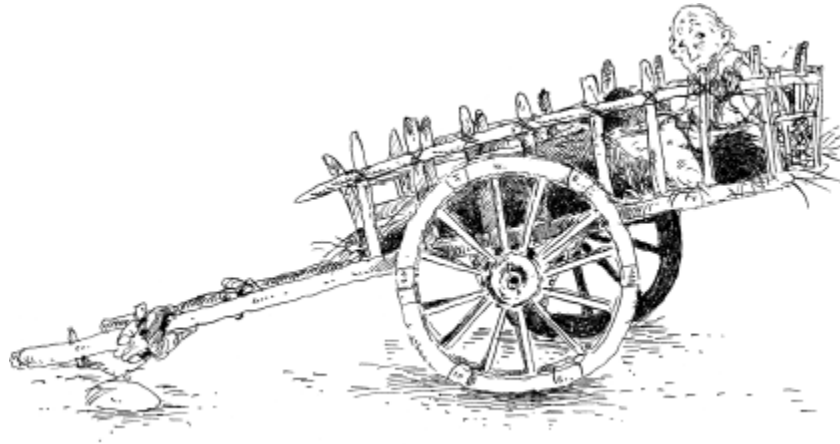
'The Night-Mare!' one of them shouted, and next moment they were all back in the middle of the road, pale-faced and with trembling hands, as if the swords they held could do nothing to defend them from the horror lurking in the trees.

'Night-Mare? This is broad daylight, you fools!' Firefox yelled at them. 'That's a bear, nothing but a bear!'

Hesitantly, they moved towards the forest again, keeping close together like a brood of chicks hiding behind their mother. Resa heard them swearing as they used their swords to cut a path through the twining wild vines and brambles, while their horses stood in the road snorting and trembling. Firefox and the Piper put their heads together, while the soldiers still standing in the road to guard the remaining prisoners stared at the forest wide-eyed, as if the Night-Mare that looked so deceptively like a bear would leap out at any moment and swallow them up, skin and hair and all, in the usual manner of ghosts.

Resa saw Mo glance at her, saw the relief in his face when he saw her – and his disappointment that she was still there too. He was still pale, but no longer as pale as if the hand of Death had touched his face. She took a step towards the cart, wanting to go to him, take his hand, see if it was still hot with the fever, but one of the soldiers roughly pushed her back.

The tree was still burning. The flames crackled as if they were singing a mocking song about the Adderhead, and when the men who had gone into the forest came back, they brought not a single one of the escaped prisoners with them.



Poor Meggie

‘Hello,’ said a soft, musical voice, and Leonardo looked up. In front of him stood the most beautiful young girl he had ever seen, a girl who might have frightened him but for the sad expression in her blue eyes. He knew about sadness.

Eva Ibbotson,
The Mystery of the Seventh Witch

Meggie did not say a word. However hard Farid tried to cheer her up she just sat there among the trees, her arms wrapped around her legs, perfectly silent. Yes, they had set many of the captives free, but her parents were not among them.

Not one of those who managed to escape had been injured. One of the children had twisted his ankle, that was all, and he was small enough for the grown-ups to carry him. The forest had swallowed them up so quickly that after only a few steps the Adderhead’s men had found themselves chasing shadows. Dustfinger hid the children inside a hollow tree, the women crawled underneath a thicket of wild vine and nettles, while the Prince’s bear kept the soldiers at a distance. The men had climbed trees and perched high up among the leaves;

Dustfinger and the Prince were the last to hide, after leading the soldiers astray in different directions.

The Black Prince advised the freed captives to go back to Ombra and, for the time being, to join the strolling players still encamped there. He himself had other plans. Before he left he spoke to Meggie, and she did not look quite so hopeless after that.

‘He said he won’t let anyone hang my father,’ she told Farid. ‘He says he knows that Mo is not the Bluejay, and he and his men will make the Adderhead realize that he’s caught the wrong man.’ And she looked so hopeful as she said this that Farid just nodded and murmured, ‘That’s great!’ – although he could think only that the Adderhead would execute Silvertongue all the same.

‘What about the informer the Piper mentioned? Will the Prince look for him?’ he asked Dustfinger, as they set out again.

‘He won’t have to look for long,’ Dustfinger said. ‘He just has to wait until one of the strolling players suddenly has his pockets full of silver.’

Silver. Farid had to admit that he was curious to see the silver towers of the Castle of Night. Even the battlements were said to be lined with silver. But they would not choose the same route as Firefox. ‘We know where they’re going,’ said Dustfinger, ‘and there are shorter and safer ways to the Castle of Night than the road.’

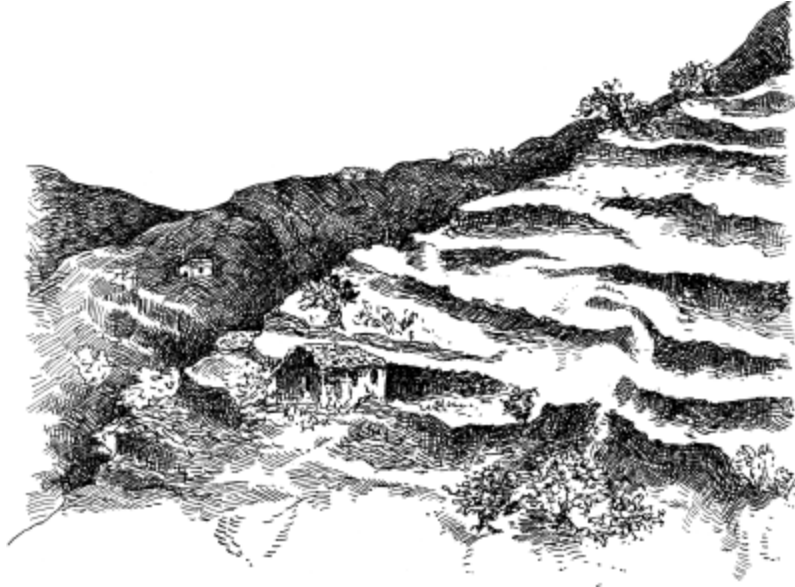
‘What about the Spelt-Mill?’ asked Meggie. ‘The mill in the forest that you mentioned? Aren’t we going there first?’

‘Not necessarily. Why?’

Meggie didn’t answer at once. Obviously she guessed that the reply would not please Dustfinger. ‘I gave Cloud-Dancer a letter for Fenoglio,’ she said at last, reluctantly. ‘I asked him to write something to save my parents, and to send it to the mill.’

‘A letter?’ Dustfinger’s voice was so cutting that Farid instinctively put his arm round Meggie’s shoulders. ‘Oh, wonderful! And suppose the wrong eyes read it?’

Farid ducked his head, but Meggie did not. Instead, she returned Dustfinger’s glance. ‘Nobody but Fenoglio can help them now,’ she said. ‘You know that. You know it perfectly well.’



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A Knock on the Door

Lancelot considered his cup.

‘He is inhuman,’ he said at last. ‘But why should he be human? Are angels supposed to be human?’

T.H. White,
The Ill-Made Knight

The horseman Fenoglio had sent after Meggie had been gone for days now. ‘You must ride like the wind,’ he had told the man, saying that the life or death of a young and, of course, beautiful girl was at stake. (After all, he wanted to be sure that the man would really do his best.) ‘But I’m afraid you won’t be able to persuade her to come back with you. She’s very obstinate,’ he had added, ‘so decide on a new meeting-place with her – a safe one this time – and tell her you’ll be back as soon as possible with a letter from me. Can you remember that?’

The soldier, a fresh-faced youth, had repeated his instructions without any trouble and galloped away, saying he would be back in three days’ time at the latest. Three days. If the lad kept his word, he’d soon be back – but Fenoglio would have no letter for him to take to Meggie. For the words that were to put the whole story right again – save the good, punish the bad – simply would not come.

Fenoglio sat day and night in the room that Cosimo had given him, staring at the sheets of parchment that Minerva had brought him, in the company of the terrified Rosenquartz. But there seemed to be a jinx on it: whatever he began to write seeped out of his head like ink running on damp paper. Where were the words he wanted? Why did they stay as dead as dry leaves? He argued with Rosenquartz, told him to send for wine, roast meat, sweetmeats, different ink, a new pen – while the smiths were hammering and forging metal out in the castle courtyards, the castle gates were reinforced, the pans for pitch were cleaned and spears sharpened. Preparing for war was a noisy business. Particularly when you were in a hurry.

And Cosimo was in a great hurry. The words for him had almost written themselves: words full of righteous anger. Cosimo's criers had already gone out proclaiming them in every market place and every village. Ever since then volunteers had been flocking to Ombra, soldiers recruited for the fight against the Adderhead. But where were the words with which Cosimo's war would be won and Meggie's father saved from the gallows at the same time?

How he racked his old brains! But nothing occurred to him. The days went by, and despair entered Fenoglio's heart. Suppose the Adderhead had hanged Mortimer long ago? Would Meggie still read what he had written then? If her father was dead, wouldn't what happened to Cosimo and this world itself be a matter of indifference to her? 'Nonsense, Fenoglio,' he muttered, as he crossed out sentence after sentence after hours of work. 'And I'll tell you what: if you can't think of any words they'll have to do without them for once. Cosimo will just have to rescue Mortimer!'

Oh yes? Suppose they storm the Adderhead's castle, and everyone in the dungeons dies as the building burns? a voice inside him whispered. Or suppose Cosimo's troops are dashed to pieces on the steep and towering walls of the Castle of Night?

Fenoglio put his pen down and buried his face in his hands. It was dark again outside, and his head was as empty as the parchment in front of him. Cosimo had sent Fenoglio an invitation, brought by Tullio, to dine at his table – but he had no appetite, although he liked to watch Cosimo listening with shining eyes to the songs he had written about him. Her Ugliness claimed that their words bored her husband, but this version of Cosimo loved what Fenoglio wrote for him: wonderful fairy-tales about his heroic deeds in the past, the time he had spent with the White Women, and the battle at Capricorn's fortress.

Yes, he was in high favour with the handsome Prince, just as he himself had written – while Her Ugliness was more and more often refused admittance to her husband's presence. So Violante spent even more time in the library than she had before Cosimo's return. Since her father-in-law's death, she no longer had to steal into it secretly or bribe Balbulus with her jewels, for Cosimo didn't mind whether or not she read books. All that interested him was whether she was writing letters to her father, or trying to make contact with the Adderhead in some other way. As if she ever had!

Fenoglio felt sorry for Violante, lonely as she was, but he consoled himself by remembering that she had always been solitary by nature. Even her son hadn't changed that. And yet – she had probably never before wanted any human being's company as much as she wanted Cosimo's. The mark on her face had faded, but something else burned there now – love, just as pointless as the birthmark, for Cosimo did not return her love. On the contrary, he was having his wife watched. For some time Violante had been followed by a sturdy, bald-headed man who used to train the Laughing Prince's hounds. Now he shadowed Her Ugliness as if he had turned himself into a dog, a sniffer dog trying to pick up the scent of all her thoughts. Apparently Violante asked Balbulus to write letters to Cosimo, pleading letters assuring him of her loyalty and devotion, but

people said he didn't read them. One of his courtiers even claimed that Cosimo had forgotten how to read.

Fenoglio took his hands away from his face and looked enviously at the sleeping Rosenquartz, lying beside the inkwell and snoring peacefully. He was just picking up his pen again when there was a knock at the door.

Who could it be so late at night? Cosimo usually went out riding at this hour.

It was his wife standing at the door. Violante was wearing one of the black dresses she had put away when Cosimo returned. Her eyes were reddened, as if sore with weeping, but perhaps she was just using the beryl too often.

'Cosimo has taken Brianna with him again!' she said in a broken voice. 'She's allowed to ride with him, eat with him, she even spends the nights with him. She tells him stories now instead of me, she reads to him, sings for him, dances for him the way she once did for me. And I'm left alone.'

Fenoglio rose from his chair. 'Come in!' he said. 'Where's your shadow?'

'I bought a litter of puppies and told him to train them, as a surprise for Cosimo. Since then he disappears on occasion.'

She was clever, oh yes, in fact very clever. Had he known that? No, he hardly even remembered making her up.

'Sit down!' He gave her his own chair – there was no other – and sat on the chest under the window where he kept his clothes. Not his old, moth-eaten garments, but the new ones that Cosimo had given him, magnificent clothes made for a court poet.

'Can't you talk to her?' Violante passed nervous hands over her black dress. 'Brianna loves your songs, she might listen to you! I need her. I have no one else in this castle except for Balbulus, and all he wants is for me to give him gold to buy more pigments.'

‘What about your son?’

‘He doesn’t like me.’

Fenoglio did not reply, for she was right. Jacopo didn’t like anyone except his sinister grandfather, and no one liked Jacopo either. He wasn’t easy to like.

Night came in from outside, and the hammering of the smiths. ‘Cosimo is planning to reinforce the city walls,’ Violante went on. ‘He’s going to fell every tree from here to the river. They say Nettle cursed him for it. They say she said she’d go to the White Women and tell them to fetch him back again.’

‘Don’t worry. The White Women don’t do as Nettle says.’

‘Are you sure?’ She rubbed her sore eyes. ‘Brianna is supposed to read to me! He has no right to take her away. I want you to write to her mother. Cosimo has all my letters read, but *you* can ask her to come. He trusts you. Write and tell Brianna’s mother that Jacopo wants to play with her son, and say she’s to bring him to the castle about midday. I know she used to be a minstrel woman, but I’m told she grows herbs now; all the physicians in the city go to her. I have some very rare plants in my garden. Write and tell her she can take anything from the garden that she likes: seeds, root runners, cuttings, anything at all if only she will come.’

Roxane. She wanted Roxane to come here.

‘Why do you want to talk to her mother and not Brianna herself? She’s not a little girl any more.’

‘I tried! She won’t listen. She just looks at me in silence, murmurs excuses – and goes back to him. No, I have to speak to her mother.’

Fenoglio said nothing. From all he knew of Roxane, he wasn’t sure that she would come. After all, he himself had given her a proud nature and a dislike of royal blood. On the other hand – hadn’t he promised Meggie to keep an eye on Dustfinger’s daughter? If he couldn’t keep any other promise, because his

words had failed him so pitifully, perhaps he should at least try with this one ... Heavens, he thought. I wouldn't like to be anywhere near Dustfinger when he hears that his daughter is spending her nights with Cosimo!

'Very well, I'll send Roxane a messenger,' he said. 'But don't expect too much. I've heard that she isn't particularly happy to have her daughter living at court.'

'I know!' Violante rose, and glanced at the paper waiting on his desk. 'Are you writing a new story? Is it about the Bluejay? You must show it to me first!' For a moment she was very much the Adderhead's daughter.

'Of course, of course,' Fenoglio hastily assured her. 'You'll get it before even the strolling players. And I'll write it the way you like a story best: dark, hopeless, sinister ...' Cruel too, he added silently. For Her Ugliness loved stories full of darkness. She didn't want to be told tales of good fortune and beauty; she liked to hear about death, ugly things, secrets heavy with tears. She wanted her very own world, and it had never heard of beauty and good fortune.

She was still gazing at him, with the same arrogant look that her father turned on the world. Fenoglio remembered the words he had once written about her kindred: *Noble blood – for centuries the Adderhead's kin firmly believed that the blood flowing in their veins made them bolder, cleverer, stronger than all who were their subjects.* The same look in their eyes for hundreds and hundreds of years, even in those of Her Ugliness, whom her noble family would happily have drowned at birth in the castle moat, like a puppy born deformed.

'The servants say Brianna's mother can sing even better than she does. They say her mother knew how to make stones weep and roses blossom with her voice.' Violante patted her face, just where the birthmark had been such a fiery red only a short time ago.

‘Yes, I’ve heard much the same.’ Fenoglio followed her to the door.

‘They even say she sang in my father’s castle, but I don’t believe that. My father never let any strolling players through his gate. The nearest they came was to be hanged outside it.’ Yes, because there was once a rumour that your mother betrayed him with a minstrel, thought Fenoglio as he opened the door for her.

‘Brianna says her mother doesn’t sing any more because she believes her voice brings great misfortune to everyone she loves. It seems that happened to Brianna’s father.’

‘I’ve heard that story too.’

Violante went out into the corridor. Even at close quarters her birthmark was barely visible now. ‘You’ll send the messenger to her tomorrow morning?’

‘If that’s what you want.’

She looked down the dark corridor. ‘Brianna will never talk about her father. One of the cooks says he was a fire-eater. The way that cook tells the story, Brianna’s mother was deeply in love with him, but then one of the fire-raisers fell in love with her himself and slashed the fire-eater’s face.’

‘Yes, I’ve heard that one as well!’ Fenoglio looked at her thoughtfully. Dustfinger’s bittersweet story was certainly very much to Violante’s taste.

‘She took him to a physician, the cook says, and stayed with him until his face was healed.’ How far away her voice sounded, as if she had lost herself among the words. Fenoglio’s words. ‘But he left her all the same.’ Violante turned her face away. ‘Write that letter!’ she said abruptly. ‘Write it tonight.’ Then she hurried away in her black dress, in such haste that it looked as if she were suddenly ashamed of coming to see him.

‘Rosenquartz,’ said Fenoglio, closing the door behind her. ‘Do you think I’m only any good at making up characters who are

sad or bad?’

But the glass man was still asleep beside the quill, from which ink dripped on to the empty sheet of parchment.

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Roxane

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red.
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

William Shakespeare,
Sonnets, No. 130

Fenoglio waited for Roxane in a room in the castle where petitioners were usually received, ordinary folk who came here to tell Cosimo's administrators their troubles while a scribe recorded their words on paper (parchment being far too valuable for such purposes). Then they were sent away hoping that their prince would put his mind to their concerns sometime. But under the Laughing Prince that had not been very often, except at Violante's persuasion, so his subjects had usually settled their quarrels among themselves, with or without violence, depending on their temperament and their influence in the community. It was to be hoped that Cosimo would change all that soon ...

'What am I doing here?' murmured Fenoglio, looking around the high-ceilinged, narrow room. He had still been in bed (in much more comfort than at Minerva's house) when Her Ugliness's messenger had appeared. Violante sent her apologies,

said the man, and since he was better with words than anyone else she knew, she asked him to talk to Roxane on her behalf. That was how the powerful acted – offloading the less pleasant tasks in life on to other people. But on the other hand ... he had always hoped to meet Dustfinger's wife some day. Was she really as beautiful as his description of her?

With a sigh, he dropped into the armchair generally used by one of Cosimo's administrators. Since Cosimo's return, so many petitioners had flocked to the castle that in future they were going to be allowed to come and put their cases on only two days of the week. Their prince had weightier matters on his mind just now than the troubles of a farmer whose neighbour had stolen his pig, a cobbler who had bought poor quality leather from a dealer, or a seamstress whose husband beat her every night when he came home drunk. Of course, there was a judge in every town of any size to settle such quarrels, but most of them had a poor reputation. Folk said, on both sides of the Wayless Wood, that you'd get your rights only if you filled the judges' pockets with gold. So those who had no gold went up to the castle to appeal to their angel-faced prince, without realizing that he had more than enough to do preparing for his war.

When Roxane entered the room she had two children with her: a girl of about five and an older boy, probably Brianna's brother Jehan – the lad who had the dubious honour of playing with Jacopo now and then. She frowned as she scrutinized the tapestries on the walls celebrating the Laughing Prince's exploits in his youth. Unicorns, dragons, white stags ... clearly nothing had been safe from his royal spear.

'Why don't we just go into the garden?' suggested Fenoglio, noticing her expression of disapproval and quickly rising from the princely chair. If anything, she was even more beautiful than his description of her. But after all, he had sought the most wonderful of words for her when he wrote the scene in *Inkheart* where Dustfinger saw her for the first time. Yet all at once, now

that she so suddenly stood before him in the flesh, he felt as lovelorn as a silly boy. Oh, for goodness' sake, Fenoglio! he reproached himself. You made her up, and now you're staring at her as if this was the first time in your life you'd ever seen a woman! Worst of all, Roxane seemed to notice it.

'Yes, let's go into the garden! I've heard a great deal about it, but I've never seen it,' she said with a smile that cast Fenoglio into total confusion. 'But first, please tell me why you want to speak to me. Your letter said only that it was about Brianna.'

Why he wanted to speak to her? Huh! He cursed Violante's jealousy, Cosimo's faithless heart, and himself too. 'Let's go into the garden first,' he said. Perhaps it would be easier to tell her what Her Ugliness had instructed him to say in the open air.

But of course it was not.

The boy set off in search of Jacopo as soon as they were outside, but the girl stayed with Roxane, clinging to her hand as she went from plant to plant – and Fenoglio found he couldn't utter a word.

'I know why I was summoned,' said Roxane, just as he was trying for the tenth time to find the right words. 'Brianna didn't tell me herself, she'd never do that. But the maid who takes Cosimo his breakfast every morning often comes to me for advice about her sick mother, and she's told me that Brianna seldom leaves his room. Not even at night.'

'Yes. Yes, that's it ... Violante is concerned. And she hopes that you ...' Oh, damn it, how his voice was faltering! He didn't know how to go on. This wretched confusion. His story clearly had too many characters in it. How was he to foresee everything they'd think of? It was downright impossible, particularly when a young girl's heart was involved. No one could expect him to understand anything about that.

Roxane scrutinized his face as if she were still waiting for the end of his sentence. You stupid old fool, surely you're not going

to blush, Fenoglio thought – and felt the blood shoot into his wrinkled face as if to drive age out of it.

‘The boy has told me about you,’ said Roxane. ‘Farid. He’s in love with the girl who’s staying with you – Meggie, isn’t that right? When he speaks her name he looks as if he had a pearl in his mouth.’

‘Yes, I’m beginning to think that Meggie likes him too.’

What exactly, wondered Fenoglio uneasily, has the boy been saying about me? Telling her I made her up, and the man she loves too – only to kill him off again?

The little girl was still clutching Roxane’s hand. With a smile, she put a flower in the child’s long, dark hair. You know something, Fenoglio? he thought. All this is nonsense! What makes you think you invented her? She must always have been here, long before you wrote your story. A woman like her can’t possibly be made of nothing but words! You’ve been wrong all this time! They were here already, all of them: Dustfinger and Capricorn, Basta and Roxane, Minerva, Violante, the Adderhead ... you merely wrote their story, but they didn’t like it, and now they’re writing it for themselves.

The little girl felt the flower with her fingers and smiled.

‘Is she Dustfinger’s daughter?’ asked Fenoglio.

Roxane looked at him in surprise. ‘No,’ she said. ‘Our second daughter died long ago. But how do you come to know Dustfinger? He’s never mentioned you to me.’

You fool, Fenoglio, you stupid fool.

‘Oh, I certainly know Dustfinger!’ he stammered. ‘In fact I know him very well. I often visit the strolling players, you see, when they pitch their tents here outside the city wall. That’s where – er – where I met him.’

‘Really?’ Roxane ran her fingers over a plant with feathery leaves. ‘I didn’t know he’d been back there already.’ Her face thoughtful, she moved on to another flower-bed. ‘Wild mallow.

I grow it in my own fields. Isn't it beautiful? So useful, too ...' She did not look at Fenoglio as she went on. 'Dustfinger has gone. Yet again. All I had was a message to say he's following men of the Adderhead's troops who have kidnapped some of the strolling players. Her mother,' she added, putting her arm round the girl, 'is one of them. And the Black Prince, a good friend of his.'

They'd captured the Prince too? Fenoglio tried to hide his alarm. Obviously matters were even worse than he'd thought – and what he was writing down on parchment was still no use.

Roxane felt the seed-heads of a lavender bush. Their sweet scent immediately filled the air. 'I'm told that you were there when Cloud-Dancer was killed. Did you know his murderer? I heard that it was Basta, one of the fire-raisers from the forest.'

'I'm afraid what you heard was right.' Not a night passed when Fenoglio did not see Basta's knife flying through the air. It pursued him into all his dreams.

'The boy told Dustfinger that Basta was back. But I hoped he wasn't telling the truth. I'm anxious.' She spoke so softly that Fenoglio could hardly make out her words. 'So anxious that I keep finding myself just standing and staring at the forest, as if he might appear among the trees again at any moment, the way he did on the morning he came back.' She picked a dried lavender head and shook some of the tiny seeds into her hand. 'May I take these with me?'

'You can take anything you want,' replied Fenoglio. 'Seeds, runners, cuttings, so Violante told me to tell you – anything, if you'll persuade your daughter to keep Violante herself company in future and not her husband.'

Roxane looked at the seeds in her hand, and then let a few of them fall lightly to the flower-bed. 'It won't work. My daughter hasn't listened to me for years. She loves the life up here, although she knows that I don't, and she's loved Cosimo ever since she first saw him ride out of the castle gate on his

wedding day. She was barely seven then, and after that her heart was set on coming here to the castle, even if it meant working as a maid. If Violante hadn't once heard her singing down in the kitchen she'd probably still be emptying chamber-pots, feeding kitchen scraps to the pigs, and sometimes stealing upstairs in secret to feast her eyes on the statues of Cosimo. Instead, she became like Violante's little sister ... wore her clothes, looked after her son, sang and danced for her like one of the strolling players, like her own mother. Not with motley skirts and dirty feet, not sleeping by the roadside and carrying a knife to defend herself against vagrants trying to creep in under her blanket by night, but in silken clothes and with a soft bed to sleep in. She wears her hair loose, all the same, just as I did, and she loves too much, exactly as I did. No,' she said, placing the seeds in Fenoglio's hand. 'Tell Violante that much as I would like to help her, I can't.'

The little girl looked at Fenoglio. Where was her mother now?

'Listen,' he told Roxane. Her beauty took his breath away. 'Take as many seeds as you like. They'll grow and thrive in your fields much better than within these grey walls. Dustfinger has gone off with Meggie. I sent her a messenger. As soon as the man is back you'll hear everything he has to tell: where they are now, how long they'll stay away, everything!'

Roxane took the lavender from him again, picked a handful more, and carefully put them in the bag hanging from her belt. 'Thank you,' she said. 'But if I don't hear from Dustfinger soon I shall set off in search of him myself. I've stayed here too often just waiting for him to come back safe and sound, and I can't get it out of my mind that Basta is back!'

'But how will you find him? The last news I heard from Meggie was that they were making for a mill known as the Spelt-Mill. It's on the far side of the forest in Argenta. That's dangerous country!'

Roxane smiled at him, like a woman explaining the way of the world to her child. 'It will soon be dangerous here too,' she said. 'Do you think the Adderhead won't have heard by now that Cosimo is having swords forged day and night? Perhaps you should look around for some other place to do your writing, before the fiery arrows come raining down on your desk.'

Roxane's mount was waiting in the Outer Courtyard of the castle. It was an old black horse, thin and going grey around the muzzle. 'I know the Spelt-Mill,' she said, lifting the little girl up on the horse's back. 'I'll ride past it, and if I don't find them there I'll try the Barn Owl's place. He's the best physician I know on either side of the forest, and he looked after Dustfinger as a boy. Perhaps he may have heard news of him.'

Of course, the Barn Owl! How could Fenoglio have forgotten him? If Dustfinger ever had anything like a father, it was this man. He had been one of the physicians who went around with the strolling players from place to place, from market to market. Unfortunately, Fenoglio didn't know much more about him. Damn it all, he thought, how can you forget your own stories? And don't try making your age an excuse.

'If you see Jehan, send him home,' said Roxane, as she swung herself up behind the girl on the horse. 'He knows the way.'

'Are you planning to ride through the Wayless Wood on that old nag?'

'This old nag will still carry me as far as I want,' she said. The girl leaned back against her breast as she gathered up the reins. 'Goodbye,' she said, but Fenoglio held the horse back by the bridle. An idea had come to him, an idea born of desperation, but what else could he do? Wait for the mounted messenger he had sent, until it was too late?

'Roxane,' he said, low-voiced, as he looked up at her, 'I have to get a letter to Meggie. I've sent a horseman after her to tell me where she is and whether she's well, but he isn't back yet,

and by the time I've sent him off again with the letter ... (don't tell her anything about Basta and Slasher, Fenoglio, it would only upset her unnecessarily!) ... well, what I'm getting at is ...(for heaven's sake, Fenoglio, don't stare at her like that, stammering like an old dotard!) ... what I mean is, if you really do ride after Dustfinger, would you take my letter to Meggie with you? You'd probably find her sooner than any messenger I could send now.' What kind of a letter, an inner voice mocked him, a letter telling her that nothing has occurred to you? But as usual, he ignored the voice. 'It's a very important letter!' If he could have spoken even more softly he would have done so.

Roxane wrinkled her brow. Even that was a beautiful sight. 'The last time you had anything to do with a letter, it cost Cloud-Dancer his life. Still, very well, bring it to me if you like. As I said, I'm not going to wait much longer.'

The castle courtyard seemed strangely empty to Fenoglio when she had gone. Rosenquartz was waiting in his room beside the parchment, which was still blank, looking reproachful. 'You know something, Rosenquartz?' Fenoglio said to the glass man, sitting down on his chair again with a sigh. 'I think Dustfinger would wring my old neck if he knew how I gaze at his wife. But what does that matter – he'd like to wring my neck anyway, one reason more or less makes no difference. He doesn't deserve Roxane anyway, leaving her alone so often!'

'Someone's in a truly princely temper again!' remarked Rosenquartz.

'Be quiet!' growled Fenoglio. 'This parchment is about to be covered with words. And I just hope you've stirred the ink properly!'

'The ink's not to blame if the parchment is still blank!' retorted the glass man.

Fenoglio didn't throw the pen at him, although his fingers itched to do so. The words that had passed Rosenquartz's pale

lips were only the truth. How could the glass man help it if the truth was unpleasant?

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The Castle by the Sea

It was a page he had
Found in the handbook
Of heartbreak.

Wallace Stephens,
'Madame la Fleurie',
Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens

It was exactly as Mo had imagined the Castle of Night: mighty towers, round and heavily built, crenellations like black teeth below the silver rooftops. Mo thought he was seeing Fenoglio's words before his eyes when the exhausted captives staggered through the castle gateway ahead of him. Black words on paper white as milk: *The Castle of Night, a dark growth by the sea, every stone of it polished with screams, its walls slippery with tears and blood.* Yes, Fenoglio was a good storyteller. Silver rimmed the battlements and gateways, and wound over the walls like snail-trails. The Adderhead loved that metal; his subjects called it moonspit, perhaps because an alchemist had once spun him a tale that it could keep away the White Women, who hated it because it reflected their pale faces. Or so Fenoglio had written, anyway.

Of all places in the Inkworld, this was the last where Mo would have chosen to be. But he wasn't choosing his own way

through this story, that much was certain. It had even given him a new name – the Bluejay. Sometimes he felt as if the name were really his. As if he had been carrying it around in him like a seed that only now had begun to grow in this world of words.

He was feeling better. The fever was still there, like opaque glass in front of his eyes, but the pain was a tame kitten by comparison with the beast of prey that had still been tearing at him in the cave. He could sit up if he gritted his teeth, he could look round to find Resa. He seldom took his eyes off her, as if, in that way, he could protect her from the glances of the soldiers, their kicks and blows. The sight of her hurt more than his wound. By the time the gates of the Castle of Night closed behind her and the other prisoners, she could barely keep on her feet for exhaustion. She stood still and looked up at the walls surrounding her, like a mouse examining the trap it has fallen into. One of the soldiers pushed her on with the shaft of his spear, and Mo longed to put his hands round the man's neck and press hard. He tasted the hatred on his tongue and in his heart like a shivering sensation, and cursed his own weakness.

Resa looked at him and tried to smile, but she was too exhausted, and he saw her fear. The soldiers reined in their horses and surrounded the prisoners, as if they could possibly have escaped from those steeply towering walls. The vipers' heads supporting the roofs and ledges left no one in any doubt who the lord of this castle was. They looked down on the forlorn little troop from everywhere, with forked tongues in their narrow mouths, eyes of red gemstone, silver scales shimmering like fish-skin in the moonlight.

'Put the Bluejay in the tower!' Firefox's voice was almost lost in the huge expanse of the castle courtyard. 'And take the others to the dungeons.' So they were going to be separated. Mo saw Resa, moving painfully on her sore feet, turn to Firefox. One of the mounted men kicked her back so roughly with his boot that she fell to the ground. And Mo felt a dragging sensation in his breast, as if his hatred had given birth to

something, something that wanted to kill. A new heart, cold and hard.

A weapon. If only he had a weapon, one of the ugly swords they all wore at their belts, or one of those sharp, shiny knives. There seemed to be nothing more desirable in the world than such a sharp piece of metal – more desirable than all the words Fenoglio could write. They hauled him off the cart. He could hardly keep his footing, but somehow or other he stood upright. Four soldiers surrounded him and seized him, and he imagined himself killing them one by one. While that new, cold heart in his breast beat time.

‘Hey, go a bit more carefully with him, will you?’ Firefox snapped at them. ‘You think I brought him this whole damn way just for you fools to kill him now?’

Resa was crying. Mo heard her call his name again and again. He turned, but he couldn’t see her anywhere, he only heard her voice. He called her name, tried to break free, kicked out at the soldiers who were dragging him away towards one of the towers.

‘You just try that again!’ snarled one of them. ‘What’s biting you, then? You two will soon be reunited. The Adderhead likes wives to watch an execution.’

‘That’s right, he can’t get enough of their weeping and wailing,’ mocked another man. ‘You’ll see, he’ll keep her alive a little longer just for that. And you’ll get a magnificent execution, Bluejay, you mark my words.’

Bluejay. A new name. A new heart. Like ice in his breast, with edges as sharp as a blade.



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The Mill

We rode and rode and nothing happened. Wherever we went, it was calm, peaceful and beautiful. You could call it a quiet evening in the mountains, I thought, if that hadn't been so wrong.

Astrid Lindgren,
The Brothers Lionheart

It took Dustfinger over three days to reach the Spelt-Mill with Meggie and Farid. Three long, grey days during which Meggie hardly spoke a word, although Farid did his best to cheer her up. Most of the time it was raining, a fine drizzle, and soon none of them could remember what it felt like to sleep in dry clothes. Only when, at last, the dark valley where the mill stood opened out before them, did the sun break through the clouds. Low in the sky above the hills, it shed golden light on the river and the shingle roofs. There wasn't another dwelling to be seen far and wide – only the miller's house, a few outhouses, and the mill itself, with its great wooden wheel dipping deep into the water. Willows, poplars and eucalyptus bushes lined the bank of the river on which it stood, together with alders and wild pear trees. There was a cart standing at the foot of the steps leading into the mill. A broad-shouldered man, dusty with flour, was just loading it up with sacks. There was no one else in sight except a boy who, on seeing them approach, ran over to the

house. All looked peaceful – peaceful and quiet, apart from the rushing of the water, which drowned out even the chirping of the cicadas.

‘You’ll see!’ Farid whispered to Meggie. ‘Fenoglio’s written something. I’m sure he has. Or if not, we’ll just wait until—’

‘We’ll do no such thing,’ Dustfinger brusquely interrupted him, looking distrustfully around. ‘We’ll ask about the letter and then go on. Many people come to this mill, and after what happened on the road the first of the soldiers will soon be putting in an appearance. If it was up to me, we wouldn’t show our faces here until everything had calmed down a bit, but if you must ...’

‘Suppose the letter hasn’t come yet?’ Meggie looked at him with anxiety in her face. ‘When I wrote to Fenoglio I told him I’d wait for it here!’

‘Yes, and I don’t remember saying you could write to him at all, did I?’

Meggie made no answer, and Dustfinger glanced at the mill again. ‘I just hope Cloud-Dancer delivered the letter safely, and the old man hasn’t been showing it around. I don’t have to tell you what damage the words on a page can do.’

He looked around for the last time before moving out of the cover of the trees. Then he signalled to Farid and Meggie to follow him, and strode towards the buildings. The boy who had run to the house was sitting on the steps outside the door of the mill again, and a few chickens ran away, squawking, as Gwin shot towards them.

‘Farid, catch that damn marten!’ ordered Dustfinger, as he whistled Jink to his side, but Gwin hissed at Farid. He didn’t bite him (he never bit Farid), but he wasn’t letting himself be caught either. He slipped through Farid’s legs, and bounded after one of the chickens. Cackling, it fluttered up the steps of the mill, but the marten wasn’t to be shaken off that way. He shot past the boy, who was still sitting on the steps apparently

taking no interest in anything, and disappeared through the open door in pursuit of the chicken. A moment later the cackling stopped abruptly – and Meggie glanced anxiously at Dustfinger.

‘Oh, wonderful!’ he murmured, making Jink jump back into his rucksack. ‘A marten in the flour and a dead chicken, that’s going to make us very popular here! Talk of the devil ...’

The man loading up the cart wiped his floury hands on his trousers and came towards them.

‘Excuse me, please!’ Dustfinger called to him. ‘Where’s the miller? I’ll pay for the chicken, of course. But we’re really here to collect something. A letter.’

The man stopped in front of them. He was a full head taller than Dustfinger. ‘I’m the miller now,’ he said. ‘My father’s dead. A letter, you say?’ He inspected them one by one. His eyes lingered longest on Dustfinger’s face.

‘Yes, a letter from Ombra,’ replied Dustfinger, glancing up at the mill. ‘Why isn’t it grinding? Don’t the farmers bring you their grain any more, or have you run out of miller’s men?’

The miller shrugged. ‘Someone brought us damp spelt to grind yesterday. The bran gummed up the millstones. My man spent hours cleaning them. What kind of letter is it? And who’s it to? Don’t you have a name?’

Dustfinger looked at him thoughtfully. ‘So is there a letter here?’

‘It’s for me,’ said Meggie, stepping forward beside him. ‘Meggie Folchart. That’s my name.’

The miller inspected her at length – her dirty dress, her matted hair – and then he nodded. ‘Yes, I have it inside,’ he said. ‘I’m only asking because a letter can be dangerous in the wrong hands, can’t it? Go on in, I’ll just load this last sack up.’

‘Fill the water bottles,’ Dustfinger whispered to Farid, slinging his rucksack over the boy’s shoulders. ‘I’ll catch that

damn marten, pay for the chicken, and as soon as Meggie has the letter we'll be off out of here.'

Before Farid could protest, he had disappeared into the mill. With Meggie. The boy passed his arm over his dirty face and watched them go.

'Fill the water bottles!' muttered Farid as he climbed down the bank to the river. 'Catch the marten! Does he think I'm his servant?' The mill boy was still sitting on the steps as Farid stood in the cold river, holding their gourds under water. There was something about that boy that he didn't like. Something in his face. Fear. Yes, that was it. He was afraid. What of? It's hardly likely to be me, thought Farid, looking round. Something was wrong; he could smell it. He'd always been able to smell it, even back in his other life when he had to stand guard, spy out the land, follow people unseen, go scouting ahead – oh yes, he knew what danger smelled like. He put the water bottles in the rucksack with Jink and scratched the sleepy marten's head.

He didn't see the body until he was about to wade back to the bank. The dead man was still young, and Farid had a feeling that he'd seen his face before. Hadn't the man thrown a copper coin into his bowl in Ombra, during the celebrations at the castle? The body was caught in the branches bending low above the water, but the wound in its chest was clearly visible. A knife. Farid's heart began to race so suddenly that he could hardly breathe. He looked at the mill. The boy sitting outside it was clutching his own shoulders as if he feared he might fall apart with terror. But the miller had disappeared.

No sound could be heard from the mill, but that meant nothing. The rushing water would have drowned out everything – screams, the clash of swords ...

Come on, Farid, he told himself sharply. Slink up there and find out what's going on. You've done it a hundred times – no, even more often. Ducking low, he waded through the river and climbed up on to the bank behind the millwheel. His heart was

in his mouth as he leaned against the wall of the mill, but that was nothing new either. A thousand times or more he had slunk up to a building, a window, a closed door, with his heart beating hard. He leaned Dustfinger's rucksack with the sleeping marten in it against the wall.

Gwin. Gwin had run inside the mill. And Dustfinger had gone after him. That wasn't good. Not good at all. Meggie was with him too. Farid looked up at the mill. The nearest window was a good way above his head, but luckily the wall was rough-textured. 'Keep silent as a snake,' he whispered to himself as he hauled himself up. The window-sill was white with flour dust. Holding his breath, Farid peered in. The first thing he saw was a podgy fellow with a foolish face, probably the miller's man. Farid had never seen the other man beside him before, but unfortunately he couldn't say the same of his companion.

Basta. The same thin face, the same vicious smile. Only the clothes were different. Basta was no longer wearing his white shirt and black suit with the flower in his buttonhole. No, Basta now wore the Adderhead's silvery grey, and he had a sword at his side. With a knife in his belt too, of course. But he was holding a dead chicken in his left hand.

Only the millstone stood between him and Dustfinger – the millstone and Gwin, who was crouching in the middle of the round stone, staring longingly at the chicken as the tip of his tail twitched restlessly up and down. Meggie was standing close to Dustfinger. Was she thinking the same as Farid? Did she remember Fenoglio's deadly words? Perhaps, for she was trying to entice Gwin over to her, but the marten took no notice.

What am I to do, Farid wondered, what on earth am I to do? Climb in? Nonsense, what use would that be? His silly little knife couldn't prevail against two swords, and then there'd be the miller and his man to deal with too. The miller was standing right beside the door. 'Well, are these the folk you were waiting for?' he asked Basta. How pleased with himself

and his lies he looked. Farid would have loved to use his knife to peel that sly smile off his lips.

‘Yes, they are!’ purred Basta. ‘The little witch, and the fire-eater into the bargain. It was well worth the wait. Even though I’ll probably never get that damned flour out of my lungs again.’

Think, Farid. Go on. He looked around, let his eyes wander, as if they could find him a way of escape through the solid masonry. There was another window, but the miller’s man was standing in front of it, and a wooden staircase led up to the loft, where they probably stored the grain. They would tip it through the wooden hopper sticking up through the floor of the loft, and then it would fall on the millstone. The hopper! Yes, it rose through the ceiling of the mill like a wooden mouth right above the stone. Suppose he ...

Farid looked up at the mill. Was there another window higher up? Yes, there was, hardly more than a hole in the wall, but he had crawled through narrower openings before. His heart was still in his mouth as he hauled himself further up the wall. The river flowed fast to his left, and a crow stared at him from a willow as suspiciously as if it were about to give him away to the miller at any moment. Farid was breathing heavily as he forced his shoulders through the narrow aperture in the wall. As he set foot on the wooden floorboards of the loft, they creaked treacherously, but the river drowned out that tell-tale sound. On his stomach, Farid inched over to the hopper and peered down through it. Right below him stood Basta. And Dustfinger must be standing opposite him on the other side of the stone, with Meggie. Farid couldn’t see him, but he could imagine only too well what Dustfinger was thinking of: Fenoglio’s words telling the tale of his death.

‘Grab that marten, Slasher!’ Basta told the man beside him. ‘Go on, do it.’

‘Do it yourself. You think I want to catch rabies?’

‘Come here, Gwin!’ That was Dustfinger’s voice. What was he doing? Trying to laugh his own fear in the face, the way he sometimes did when the fire bit his skin? Gwin leaped off the stone. He would be sitting on Dustfinger’s shoulder, staring at Basta. Stupid Gwin. He didn’t know about the words ...

‘Fine new clothes, Basta!’ said Dustfinger. ‘When the servant finds a new master he must wear new clothes, mustn’t he?’

‘Servant? Who’s a servant here? Just listen to him. As bold as if he’d never felt my knife! Have you forgotten how you screamed when it cut your face?’ Basta set one boot on the millstone. ‘Don’t you dare move so much as a finger. Hands up! Go on, up in the air! I know what you can do with fire in this world. One little whisper from you, one snap of your fingers, and my knife goes into the little witch’s breast.’

A snap of the fingers. *Yes, get on with it, Farid!* He looked around, searching for what he needed, quickly twisted some straw together to make a torch, and began whispering. ‘Come along!’ he lured the fire, clicking his tongue and hissing the way Dustfinger had shown him after he put a little fire-honey in his mouth for the first time. They had practised every evening behind Roxane’s house, practised the language of fire, its crackling words ... Farid whispered them all until a tiny flame came licking up out of the straw.

‘Ooh dear! See how the little witch is staring at me, Slasher?’ asked Basta below him, with pretended terror. ‘What a pity she needs written words for her witchcraft! But there’s no book anywhere here. Wasn’t it nice of her to write to us in person and tell us where to find you?’ Basta disguised his voice to make it sound shrill and girlish. ‘*The Adderhead’s men have taken them all away, my parents and the strolling players! Write something for me, Fenoglio!* Or something like that. You know, I was really disappointed to hear that your father’s still alive. Oh, don’t look so disbelieving, little witch, I still can’t read and I don’t intend to learn, but there are enough fools around the place who can, even in this world. A scribe ran into our arms

right outside the city gates of Ombra. It took a little while for him to decipher your scribble, but we still had a good enough start to get here ahead of you. We were even on the spot in time to kill the old man's messenger, who was supposed to warn you.'

'You're even more talkative than you used to be, Basta.' Dustfinger's voice sounded as if he found this tedious. How well he could hide his fear! Farid always admired him for that, almost more than for his skill with fire.

Slowly, very slowly, Basta drew his knife from his belt. Dustfinger didn't like knives. He generally kept his in his rucksack, and his rucksack was leaning against the wall outside. Farid had so often begged him to keep the knife in his belt, but no, he wouldn't hear of it.

'Talkative? Well, well.' Basta looked at his reflection in the bright blade of the knife. 'No one could say the same of you. But I tell you what! Since we've known each other so long, I'll carry the news of your death to your wife in person! What do you say to that, fire-eater? Do you think Roxane will be glad to see me again?' Caressingly, he ran two fingers along the blade. 'And as for you, little witch ... I thought it was really nice of you to entrust your letter to an old tightrope-walker. With his stiff leg, he wasn't half as fast as my knife.'

'Cloud-Dancer? You killed Cloud-Dancer?'

There was no boredom in Dustfinger's voice now. Stand still, please, whispered Farid. Please, please stand still. He was hastily feeding more straw to the flames.

'Ah, so you didn't know that yet!' Basta's voice became soft with contentment. 'Yes, there'll be no more dancing for your old friend. Ask Slasher, he was there.'

'You're lying!' Meggie's voice shook. Farid bent cautiously forward. He saw Dustfinger push her roughly behind him, his eyes searching for a way out, but there was none. Sacks full of flour were stacked behind him and Meggie, Slasher was barring

their way to their right, on their left was the man with the silly grin, and in front of the window through which Farid had peered stood the miller. But there was straw lying on the floor at their feet, a great deal of straw, and it would burn almost as well as paper.

Basta laughed. With one bound, he leaped up on the millstone and looked down at Dustfinger. He was standing very close to the outlet of the hopper now. *Hurry up, come on*, whispered Farid, kindling a second bundle of straw from the first and holding them both above the funnel. He hoped its wood wouldn't catch fire. He hoped the straw would slide through. He hoped so. His fingers were scorched as he stuffed the burning bundles in, but he took no notice. Dustfinger was in a trap, and Meggie was in it with him. What did a couple of burned fingers matter?

'Yes, poor Cloud-Dancer was far too slow,' purred Basta, as he tossed his knife from one hand to the other. 'You're faster than him, I know, fire-eater, but you won't get away all the same. And this time I'm not just going to cut your face, this time I'll slice your skin off in strips from head to foot.'

Now! Farid let the burning straw drop. The hopper swallowed it like a sack of corn, and spat it out on Basta's boots.

'Fire! Where's that fire coming from?' It was the miller's voice. His man was bellowing like an ox when it sees the butcher's hatchet.

Farid's fingers hurt, his skin was beginning to blister, but the fire was dancing, dancing up Basta's boots, licking close to his arms. Terrified, he stumbled, fell backwards off the millstone and cracked his head open against the edge of it. Blood flowed. Basta feared fire, feared it more than the bad luck against which his amulets were supposed to protect him.

As for Farid, he raced down the steps to the floor of the mill, pushed aside the miller's man, who was staring at him as if he

were a ghost, ran to Meggie and pulled her away with him towards the window through which he had first looked.

‘Jump!’ he called to her. ‘Quick, jump out!’ Meggie was trembling. Her hair was full of flour, and she closed her eyes before she jumped, but jump she did. Farid looked round at Dustfinger. He was talking to the flames, making them sing and grow, while the miller and his man beat desperately at the burning straw with empty sacks, but the fire danced on. It was dancing for Dustfinger.

Farid crouched in the open window. ‘Come on!’ he called to Dustfinger. ‘Hurry up!’

Where was Basta?

Dustfinger pushed the miller aside and ran to him through the smoke and flames. Farid swung himself out of the window and clung to the sill outside as he watched the dazed Basta hauling himself up by the millstone. His hand was bloody when he put it to the back of his head. ‘Get him!’ he shouted to Slasher. ‘Hold the fire-eater fast!’

‘Quick!’ cried Farid, as his toes tried to find a foothold on the outside of the wall, but Dustfinger stumbled over an empty sack as he ran. Gwin jumped off his shoulder and scurried towards Farid, and when Dustfinger got to his feet again Slasher was standing between him and the window, coughing, his sword in his hand.

‘Come on!’ Farid heard Meggie shouting. She was standing right under the window, her eyes wide with fear, staring up at him. But Farid wriggled his way back into the burning mill.

‘What are you doing? Get out!’ Dustfinger shouted at him as he struck out with a burning sack at Slasher, whose trousers had caught fire. Slasher swayed as he lashed out with his sword, first at the flames, then at Dustfinger. His sharp blade slit Dustfinger’s leg open just as Farid jumped down into the burning straw again. Dustfinger stumbled back against the wall,

pressing his hand to his thigh, while Slasher raised his sword again, half mad with rage and pain.

‘No!’ Farid’s own voice rang in his ears as he jumped at the man. He bit his shoulder and kicked him until he dropped the sword that he had been pointing at Dustfinger’s chest. Then Farid pushed Slasher into the flames. The man was more than a head taller than Farid himself, but desperation lent him strength. Farid was about to attack Basta too as he emerged from the smoke, coughing, but Dustfinger pulled him back and hissed at the flames until they made for Basta like angry vipers. Farid heard Basta scream, but did not turn to look. He just stumbled towards the window, with Dustfinger beside him, cursing as he pressed his fingers to his bleeding leg. But he was alive. He was really alive. While the fire was devouring Basta.



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The Best of all Nights

‘Eat,’ said Merlot.

‘I couldn’t possibly,’ said Despereaux, backing away from the book.

‘Why?’

‘Um,’ said Despereaux, ‘it would ruin the story.’

Kate DiCamillo,
The Tale of Despereaux

Later, none of them knew how they had got away from the mill. All Farid could remember were images: of Meggie’s face as she stumbled down to the river, of the blood in the water when Dustfinger jumped in, of the smoke they could see still rising into the sky after they had been wading through the cold water for more than an hour. But no one came after them: not Slasher or the miller or his man, and not Basta either. Only Gwin appeared on the bank at some point. Stupid Gwin.

It was the middle of the night when Dustfinger clambered out of the water, his face pale with exhaustion. As he let himself drop on to the grass, Farid anxiously listened into the darkness, but all he heard was a loud and steady roar like the breathing of a gigantic animal.

‘What’s that?’ he whispered.

‘The sea. Don’t you know what the sea sounds like?’

The sea. Gwin jumped on Farid's back as he was looking at Dustfinger's leg, but he shooed the marten away. 'Get out!' he snapped. 'Go hunting! You've done enough harm for one day.' Then he let Jink out of the rucksack too, and looked for something to bind up the wound. Meggie wrung out her wet dress and crouched beside them.

'Is it bad?'

'No, I'm fine,' said Dustfinger, but he winced as Farid cleaned the deep gash. 'Poor Cloud-Dancer!' he murmured. 'He escaped death once, and now the Grim Reaper's come for him after all. Who knows, perhaps the White Women don't like people to slip through their fingers like that?'

'I'm sorry.' Meggie spoke so quietly that Farid could hardly hear her. 'I'm so very sorry. It's all my fault, and he died for nothing. Because where is Fenoglio going to find us now, even if he's written something for me?'

'Fenoglio.' Dustfinger spoke as if it were the name of some disease.

'Did you feel them too?' Meggie looked at him. 'I thought I could feel his words on my skin. I thought: they're going to kill Dustfinger and there's nothing we can do about it!'

'But there was,' said Farid defiantly.

Dustfinger, however, leaned back and looked up at the stars. 'Really? We'll see. Perhaps the old man's thought up some different fate for me by now. Perhaps death is waiting just around another corner.'

'Let it wait!' was all Farid would say, fishing a bag out of Dustfinger's rucksack. 'A little fairy dust can never hurt,' he murmured as he trickled the glittering powder into the wound. Then he pulled his shirt over his head, cut a strip off with his knife, and tied it carefully round Dustfinger's leg. It wasn't easy with his burned fingers, but he did his best, although the pain twisted his face.

Dustfinger reached for his hand and looked at it, frowning. 'Heavens, your fingers are covered with as many blisters as if fire-elves had been dancing on them,' he commented. 'I guess we both need a physician. What a pity Roxane isn't here.' Sighing, he lay down on his back again and looked up at the dark sky. 'You know what, Farid?' he said, as if talking to the stars. 'There's one really strange thing about all this. If Meggie's father hadn't plucked me out of my own story, I don't suppose I'd ever have found such a fabulous watchdog as you.' He winked at Meggie. 'Did you see him biting? I'll bet Slasher thought it was the Black Prince's bear gnawing his shoulder.'

'Oh, stop it!' Farid didn't know where to look. Embarrassed, he picked a blade of grass with his bare toes.

'Yes, but Farid is cleverer than the bear,' said Meggie. 'Much cleverer.'

'Indeed. Cleverer than me too,' Dustfinger pointed out. 'And as for what he can do with fire, I'm beginning to get seriously worried.'

Farid couldn't help it; he had to grin. He felt so proud that the blood shot all the way to his ears, but in the dark no one, luckily, would see him blushing.

Dustfinger felt his leg, and cautiously rose to his feet. The first step he took made his face contort with pain, but then he limped up and down the river bank a few times. 'There we are,' he said. 'A little slower than usual, but it will do. It must.' Then he stopped in front of Farid. 'I believe I owe you a debt,' he said. 'How am I to repay you? Perhaps I could show you something new? A game with fire that only I can play? How about that?'

Farid held his breath. 'What kind of a game is it?' he asked.

'I can't show you except by the sea,' replied Dustfinger, 'but we must go there anyway, because we both need a physician. And the best physician I know lives by the sea. In the shadow of the Castle of Night.'

They decided to take turns keeping watch. Farid said he would take the first watch, and while Meggie and Dustfinger slept behind him, under the branches of a durmast oak that dipped low to the ground, he sat in the grass and looked up at the sky, where more stars shone than there were fireflies hovering above the river. Farid tried to remember a night, any night, when he had felt as he did now, so entirely at ease with himself, but he couldn't. This was the best of all nights for him – in spite of all the terrors that lay behind him, in spite of his burned fingers, which still hurt although Dustfinger had put fairy dust on them, and the cooling ointment that Roxane had made for him.

He felt so much alive. As alive as the fire.

He had saved Dustfinger. He had been stronger than the words. Everything was all right.

The two martens were squabbling behind him, no doubt over prey of some kind. 'Wake me when the moon is above that hill,' Dustfinger had said, but when Farid went to him he was sleeping deeply, with such peace in his face that Farid decided to let him sleep on, and returned to his place under the stars.

Soon afterwards, when he heard steps behind him, it was not Dustfinger but Meggie he saw there. 'I keep waking up,' she said. 'I just can't stop thinking.'

'Wondering how Fenoglio is going to find you now?'

She nodded.

She still believed in words so much. Farid believed in other things: in his knife, in courage and cunning. And in friendship. Meggie leaned her head against his shoulder, and they both remained as silent as the stars above them. After a while a wind rose, cold and gusty, salt as seawater, and Meggie sat up and clasped her arms around her knees, shivering.

'This world,' she said. 'Do you really like it?'

What a question! Farid never asked himself such things. He was glad to be with Dustfinger again, and didn't mind where that was.

'It's a cruel world, don't you think?' Meggie went on. 'Mo often told me I forget how cruel it is too easily.'

With his burned fingers, Farid stroked her fair hair. It shone even in the dark. 'They're all cruel,' he said. 'The world I come from, the world you come from, and this one too. Maybe people don't see the cruelty in your world straight away, it's better hidden, but it's there all the same.'

He put his arm round her, sensed her fear, her anxiety, her anger ... it was as if he could hear her heart whispering as clearly as the voice of fire.

'You know a funny thing?' she asked. 'Even if I could go back at this moment, I wouldn't. Now that's crazy, isn't it? It's almost as if I'd always wanted to come here, to somewhere like this. But why? It's a terrible place!'

'Terrible and beautiful,' said Farid, and kissed her. Kissing her tasted good. Much better than Dustfinger's fire-honey. Much better than anything he had ever tasted before. 'You can't go back, anyway,' he whispered to her. 'As soon as we have your father free, we'll explain that to him.'

'Explain what?'

'Why, that we're afraid he'll have to leave you here. Because you belong with me now, and I'm staying with Dustfinger.'

She laughed, and pressed her face to his shoulder in embarrassment. 'I'm sure Mo won't agree to that.'

'Well? So tell him the girls here marry when they're your age.'

She laughed again, but then her face grew grave. 'Perhaps Mo will stay too,' she said softly. 'Perhaps we'll all stay ... Resa and Fenoglio too. And we'll go and fetch Elinor and Darius as well, and then we'll all live happily ever after.' The sad note had

crept back into her voice. 'They can't hang Mo, Farid!' she whispered. 'We'll save him, won't we? And my mother and the others. It's always like that in stories: bad things happen but then it all ends happily. And this is a story.'

'Of course!' said Farid, although with the best will in the world he couldn't imagine that happy ending. He felt good, though, all the same.

After a while, Meggie dropped off to sleep beside him. And he sat there and kept watch over her – her and Dustfinger – all night long. It was the best of all nights.

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The Right Words

There's nothing ill can dwell in such a temple. If the ill spirit have so fair a house, Good things will strive to dwell with't.

William Shakespeare,
The Tempest

The groom was a fool, and took forever to saddle up the wretched horse. I never invented a character like that, thought Fenoglio. Lucky that I'm in a good mood. For he was indeed in the best of moods. He had been whistling quietly to himself for hours, because he had done it. He had found the solution! Yes, at last the words had flowed on to the parchment as if they'd just been waiting for him to fish them out of the sea of letters. The right words. The only right words. Now the story could go on and all would end well. He was an enchanter after all, a conjuror with words, one of the very first quality. No one could hold a candle to him – well, one or two, maybe, but in his own world, not this one. If only this dolt of a groom would hurry up! It was high time he went to Roxane's house or she would ride away without the letter – and then how was he going to get it to Meggie? For there was still no sign of life from the young hothead he had sent after her. That callow youth had probably got lost in the Wayless Wood.

He felt for the letter under his cloak. A good thing that words weighed light, light as a feather, even the most important of them. Roxane wouldn't have a heavy load to carry when she took Meggie the Adderhead's death warrant. And she would take something else to the principality by the sea with her – the certainty of Cosimo's victory.

Just so long as Cosimo didn't set out before Meggie even had a chance to read his words! Cosimo was burning with impatience, longing for the day when he would lead his soldiers to the other side of the forest. 'Because he wants to find out who he is!' whispered the quiet voice in Fenoglio's head (or was it in his heart?). 'Because your fine avenging angel is empty, like a box with nothing inside it. A few borrowed memories, a few stone statues – that's all the poor lad has, and your stories of his heroic deeds. He searches his empty heart in desperation for some echo of them. You ought to have tried to bring the real Cosimo back, after all, straight back from the realm of the dead, but you didn't dare!' Hush! Fenoglio shook his head in annoyance. Why did these troublesome thoughts keep returning? Everything would be all right once Cosimo sat on the Adderhead's throne. Then he'd have memories of his own, and he'd gather more of them every day. And soon the emptiness would be forgotten.

His horse was saddled at last. The groom helped him to mount, his mouth twisted in a mocking smile. The fool! Fenoglio knew he didn't cut a very good figure on a horse, he'd never get used to riding – but so what? These horses were alarming beasts, much too strong for his liking, but a poet living at his prince's court didn't travel on foot like a peasant. And he would go much faster on horseback – assuming the animal wanted to go the same way as he did. What a business it was to get the creature moving!

The hooves clattered over the paved courtyard, past the barrels of pitch and iron spikes that Cosimo was having set on the walls. The castle still resounded at night to the hammering

of the smiths, and Cosimo's soldiers slept in the wooden huts along the wall, crammed close together like larvae in an ants' nest. He had certainly brought a warrior angel into being, but hadn't angels always been warlike? The fact is, I'm just no good at making up peaceful characters, thought Fenoglio as he trotted across the yard. The good ones either have bad luck like Dustfinger, or they fall among thieves like the Black Prince. Could he ever have made up a character like Mortimer? Probably not.

As Fenoglio was riding towards the Outer Gate it swung open, so that for a moment he actually assumed the guards were finally showing a little respect for their prince's poet. But when he saw how low they bent their heads he realized that it couldn't possibly be for him.

Cosimo came riding towards him through the wide gateway, on a horse so white that it looked a little unreal. In the dark he looked almost more beautiful than by day, but wasn't that the case with all angels? Only seven soldiers followed him; he never took more as guards on his nocturnal rides. But someone else rode at his side too: Brianna, Dustfinger's daughter, no longer wearing a dress that had belonged to her mistress, poor Violante, as so often in the past, but in one of the gowns that Cosimo had given her. He heaped presents upon her, while he no longer allowed his wife even to leave the castle, or their son either. But in spite of all these proofs of love, Brianna didn't look particularly happy. And why should she? What girl would be cheerful if her lover was planning to go to war? The prospect didn't seem to cloud Cosimo's mood. Far from it; he looked as light at heart as if the future could bring nothing but good. He went riding every night. He seemed to need very little sleep, and Fenoglio had heard he rode at such a breakneck pace that hardly any of his bodyguards could keep up – like a man who had been told that Death had no power over him. What difference did it make anyway, when he could remember neither his death nor his life?

Day and night, Balbulus was painting the most wonderful pictures to illustrate stories about that lost life. More than a dozen scribes supplied him with the hand-written pages. 'My husband still won't enter the library,' Violante had commented bitterly, last time Fenoglio saw her. 'But he fills all the reading desks with books about himself.'

Unfortunately, it was only too clear that the words from which Fenoglio and Meggie had made him did not satisfy Cosimo. There were simply not enough of them. Everything he heard about himself seemed to be to do with another man. Perhaps that was why he loved Dustfinger's daughter so much: because she had nothing to do with the man he seemed to have been before his death. Fenoglio had to keep writing new and ardent love songs to Brianna for him. He generally stole them from other poets; he had always had a good memory for verse, and Meggie wasn't here now to catch him in the act of theft. Tears always came to Brianna's eyes when one of the minstrels, who were now welcomed to the castle again, sang her one of those songs.

'Fenoglio!' Cosimo reined in his horse, and Fenoglio bent his head in the most natural way in the world, as he did only for the young prince. 'Where are you going, poet? Everything's ready for us to march out!' He sounded as impatient as his horse, which was prancing back and forth, and threatened to infect Fenoglio's horse with its restlessness. 'Or would you rather stay here and sharpen your pens for all the songs you'll have to write about my victory?'

March out? Ready?

Fenoglio looked round in confusion, but Cosimo laughed. 'Do you think I'd assemble the troops here in the castle? There are far too many for that. No, they're encamped down by the river. I'm only waiting for one more company of mercenaries recruited for me in the north. They may arrive tomorrow!'

As soon as that? Fenoglio cast Brianna a quick glance. So that was why she looked so sad. 'Please, Your Grace!' Fenoglio could not conceal the anxiety in his voice. 'It's much too soon! Wait a little longer!'

But Cosimo only smiled. 'The moon is red, poet! The soothsayers think that's a good sign. A sign that we mustn't miss the moment, or all may come to grief.'

What nonsense! Fenoglio bowed his head to keep Cosimo from seeing the annoyance in his face. Cosimo knew anyway that his love of soothsayers and fortune-tellers irritated Fenoglio, who thought them all a set of avaricious frauds. 'Let me say it once again, Your Grace!' He had repeated this warning so often that it was beginning to sound flat. 'The only thing that will bring you bad luck is setting out too soon!'

But Cosimo merely shook his head indulgently.

'You're an old man, Fenoglio,' he said. 'Your blood flows slowly, but I'm young! What should I wait for? For the Adderhead to recruit mercenaries too and barricade himself in the Castle of Night?'

He probably did that long ago, thought Fenoglio. And that's why you must wait for the words, my words, and for Meggie to read them, the way she read you here. Wait for her voice! 'Just one or two weeks more, Your Grace!' he said urgently. 'Your peasants must bring their harvest in. What else will they have to live on in winter?'

But Cosimo didn't want to hear about such things. 'That truly is old man's talk!' he said angrily. 'Where are your fiery words now? They'll live on the Adderhead's stores of provisions, on the good fortune of our victory, on the silver from the Castle of Night. I'll have it distributed in the villages!'

They can't eat silver, Your Grace, thought Fenoglio, but he did not say so aloud. Instead, he looked up at the sky. Dear God, how high the moon had risen already! But Cosimo still had something on his mind.

‘There’s a question I’ve been meaning to ask you for some time,’ he said, just as Fenoglio was about to take his leave with some stammered excuse. ‘You’re so friendly with the strolling players. Everyone’s talking about that fire-eater, the one they say can talk to the flames ...’

Out of the corner of his eye, Fenoglio saw Brianna bend her head.

‘You mean Dustfinger?’

‘Yes, that’s his name. I know he’s Brianna’s father,’ said Cosimo, casting her a loving glance, ‘but she won’t talk about him. And she says she doesn’t know where he is now. But perhaps you do?’ Cosimo patted his horse’s neck. His face seemed to burn with beauty.

‘Why? What do you want of him?’

‘Isn’t that obvious? He can talk to fire! They say he can make the flames grow to a great height without burning him.’

Fenoglio understood even before Cosimo explained. ‘You want Dustfinger for your war.’ He couldn’t help it, he laughed aloud.

‘What’s so funny about that?’ Cosimo frowned.

Dustfinger the fire-dancer as a weapon. Fenoglio shook his head. ‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘I know Dustfinger very well –’ he saw Brianna give him a look of surprise as he said so – ‘and he is many things, but certainly not a warrior. He’d laugh in your face.’

‘He had better not.’ There was no mistaking the anger in Cosimo’s voice. But Brianna was looking at Fenoglio as if she had a thousand questions on the tip of her tongue. Well, this was no time for them! ‘Your Highness,’ he said hastily, ‘please excuse me now! One of Minerva’s children is ill, and I promised to get a few herbs from Brianna’s mother for her.’

‘Oh, I see. Of course. Yes, of course, ride on, and we’ll talk later.’ Cosimo gathered up his reins again. ‘If the child doesn’t

improve let me know, and I'll send a physician.'

'Thank you,' said Fenoglio, but before he finally went on his way there was one question he himself had to ask. 'I've heard your wife isn't well either?' Balbulus, who at present was the only visitor allowed to see Violante, had told him so.

'Oh, she's just in a temper.' Cosimo took Brianna's hand as if to comfort her for the fact that they were talking about his wife. 'Violante loses her temper easily. She gets it from her father. She simply will not understand why I won't let her leave the castle, yet it's obvious that her father's informers are everywhere, and who would they try to pump for information first? Violante and Jacopo.' It was hard not to believe every word that those beautiful lips uttered, particularly when they spoke with so much genuine conviction.

'Well, I expect you're right! But please don't forget that your wife hates her father.'

'You can hate someone and obey him all the same. Isn't that so?' Cosimo looked at Fenoglio with that naked expression in his eyes, like the eyes of a very young baby.

'Yes, yes, probably,' he replied uncomfortably. Every time Cosimo looked at him like that, Fenoglio felt as if he had found an empty page in a book, a moth-hole in the finely woven carpet of words.

'Your Highness!' he said, bowing his head again, and he finally, if not very elegantly, got his horse to trot out of the gateway.

Brianna had given him a good description of the way to her mother's farmhouse. He had asked her about it after Roxane's visit, apparently in all innocence, saying that he was plagued by aching bones. Dustfinger's daughter was a strange child. She wanted nothing to do with her father, and obviously not much with her mother either. Luckily she had warned him about the goose, so he was holding the horse's reins firmly when the

cackling bird came towards him. Roxane was sitting outside her house when he rode into the yard. It was a poor place. Her beauty seemed to fit into it as little as a jewel in a beggar's hut. Her son was sleeping in the doorway beside her, curled up like a puppy, his head on her lap.

'He wants to come with me,' she said as Fenoglio slid clumsily off the horse. 'The little girl cried too, when I told her I had to go away. But I can't take them, not to Argenta. The Adderhead's had children hanged before now. A friend is going to look after the girl for me, and Jehan, and the plants and animals too.'

She stroked her son's dark hair, and for a moment Fenoglio didn't want her to ride away. But what would become of his words then? Who else would find Meggie? Should he ask Cosimo for another horseman who might not come back either? Well, who knows, maybe Roxane won't come back, an insidious voice inside him whispered. And then your precious words will be lost. 'Nonsense!' he said angrily, out loud. 'I made a copy, of course.'

'What did you say?' Roxane looked at him in surprise.

'Oh, nothing, nothing!' Heavens above, now he was talking to himself. 'There's something else I have to tell you – don't ride to the mill! A minstrel who sings for Cosimo has brought me news from the Black Prince.'

Roxane pressed her hand to her mouth.

'No, no. It's not so bad!' Fenoglio quickly reassured her. 'The fact is, Meggie's father has obviously been taken prisoner by the Adderhead, but to be honest I feared as much. As for Dustfinger and Meggie – well, to be brief, the mill where Meggie was going to wait for my letter seems to have burned down. Apparently the miller is telling everyone that a marten made fire rain down from the roof, while a wizard with a scarred face spoke to the flames. It seems this wizard had a demon with him in the shape

of a dark-skinned boy who saved him when he was wounded and helped him and a girl to escape.'

Roxane looked at him with a thoughtful expression, as if she had to search for the meaning of what he said. 'Wounded?'

'Yes, but they escaped! That's the main thing. Roxane, do you think you really can find them?'

She passed a hand over her forehead. 'I'll try.'

'Don't worry,' said Fenoglio. 'You heard what they're saying. Dustfinger has a demon protecting him now. In any case, hasn't he always managed very well on his own?'

'Oh yes, indeed he has!'

Fenoglio cursed every wrinkle on his old face, she was so beautiful. Why didn't he have Cosimo's good looks? Although would she like that? She liked Dustfinger, who ought to have been dead by now if the story had gone the way he had once written it. Fenoglio, he told himself, this is going too far. You're behaving like a jealous lover!

But Roxane was taking no notice of him anyway. She looked down at the boy sleeping in her lap. 'Brianna was furious when she heard I was going to ride after her father,' she said. 'I only hope Cosimo will look after her, and won't begin his war before I get back.'

Fenoglio made no reply to that. Why tell her about Cosimo's plans? To make her even more anxious? No. He took out the letter for Meggie from under his cloak. Written words that could become sound, a mighty sound ... he had never before made Rosenquartz seal a letter so carefully.

'This letter can save Meggie's parents,' he said urgently. 'It can save her father. It can save us all, so take good care of it!'

Roxane turned the sealed parchment this way and that, as if it seemed to her too small for such great claims. 'I never heard of a letter that could open the dungeons of the Castle of Night,' she said. 'Do you think it's right to give the girl false hopes?'

‘They aren’t false,’ said Fenoglio, rather hurt to find that she had so little faith in his words.

‘Very well. If I find Dustfinger, and the girl is still with him, she’ll get your letter.’ Roxane stroked her son’s hair again, very gently, as if to brush a leaf away. ‘Does she love her father?’

‘Yes. Yes, she loves him very much.’

‘My daughter loves hers too. Brianna loves him so much that she won’t speak a word to him now. When he went away in the old days, when he just used to go into the forest or down to the sea, anywhere that fire or the wind happened to lure him, she would try to run after him on her little feet. I don’t think he even noticed, he always disappeared so fast, quick as a fox that has stolen a chicken. But she loved him all the same. Why? That boy loves him too. He even thinks Dustfinger needs him, but he needs no one, only fire.’

Fenoglio looked thoughtfully at her. ‘You’re wrong,’ he said. ‘He was wretchedly unhappy when he was away. You should have seen him.’

She eyed him incredulously. ‘You know where he was?’

Now what? Old fool that he was, what had he said this time? ‘Well, yes,’ he stammered. ‘Yes. Yes, I was there myself.’ He needed some lies, and where were they? The truth wasn’t going to be much use this time. A few good lies were needed to explain everything. Why shouldn’t he find a few good words for Dustfinger for a change – even if he envied him his wife?

‘He says he couldn’t come back.’ She didn’t believe it, but you could tell from Roxane’s voice how much she wished she did.

‘That’s exactly how it was! He had a bad time! Capricorn set Basta on him, they took him far, far away and tried to make him tell them how to talk with fire.’ Here came the lies now, and they might even be close to the truth, who could say? ‘Believe me, Basta took his revenge for your preference for Dustfinger! They shut him away for years, and he finally escaped, but they soon found him and beat him half to death.’

Meggie had told him that part. A little of the truth couldn't hurt, and Roxane didn't have to know that it was because of Resa. 'It was dreadful, dreadful!' Fenoglio felt the pleasure of storytelling run away with him, the pleasure of watching Roxane's eyes widen as she hung on his lips, waiting eagerly for his next words. Should he make Dustfinger a little villainous after all? No, he'd killed him once already, he'd do him a favour today. He would make his wife forgive him, once and for all, for staying away those ten years. Sometimes I can be a truly benevolent person, thought Fenoglio.

'He thought he'd die. He thought he'd never see you again, and that was the worst of it for him.' Fenoglio had to clear his throat. He was moved by his own words – and so was Roxane. Oh yes, he saw the distrust disappear from her eyes, he saw them soften with love. 'After that he wandered in strange lands, like a dog turned out of doors, looking for a way that would take him not to Basta or Capricorn but to you.' The words were coming as if of their own accord now. As if he really knew what Dustfinger had felt all those years. 'He was forlorn, truly forlorn, his heart was cold as a stone from loneliness. There was no room in it for anything but longing – longing for you. And for his daughter.'

'He had two daughters.' Roxane's voice was almost inaudible.

Damn it, he'd forgotten that. Two daughters, of course! But Roxane was so rapt with his words that his mistake didn't break the spell.

'How do you know all this?' she asked. 'He never told me you knew each other so well.'

Oh, no one knows him better, thought Fenoglio. I can assure you, my beauty, no one knows him better.

Roxane pushed her black hair back from her face. Fenoglio saw a trace of grey in it, as if she had combed it with a dusty comb. 'I shall ride early in the morning,' she said.

‘Excellent.’ Fenoglio drew his horse to his side. Why was it so difficult to get on to these creatures with anything like elegance? ‘Look after yourself,’ he said, when he was finally on the horse’s back. ‘And the letter too. And give Meggie my love. Tell her everything will be all right. I promise.’

As he rode away she stood beside her sleeping son, looking thoughtful, and watched him go. He really did hope she would find Dustfinger, and it wasn’t just that he wanted Meggie to get his words. No. A little happiness in this story couldn’t hurt, and Roxane was not happy without Dustfinger. That was the way he’d fixed it.

He doesn’t deserve her, all the same, thought Fenoglio again as he rode towards the lights of Ombra, which were neither as bright nor as many as the lights of his old world, but were at least equally inviting. Soon the houses behind the protecting walls would be without their menfolk. They would all be going with Cosimo, including Minerva’s husband – although she had begged him to stay – and the cobbler whose workshop was next to his. Even the rag-collector who went round every Tuesday was going to fight the Adderhead. Would they follow Cosimo as willingly if I’d made him ugly, Fenoglio wondered? Ugly as the Adderhead with his butcher’s face? No, people find it easier to believe that a man with a handsome face has good intentions, so he had done well to put an angel on the throne. Yes, that was clever, extremely clever. Fenoglio caught himself humming quietly as the horse carried him past the guards. They let him in without a word, their prince’s poet, the man who put their world into words, and had made it out of words. *Bow your heads to Fenoglio!*

The guards would go with Cosimo too, and the soldiers up in the castle, and the grooms who were hardly as old as the boy who went around with Dustfinger. Even Minerva’s son Ivo would have gone if she had let him. They’ll all come back, thought Fenoglio as he rode towards the stables. Or most of

them, at least. It will end well, I know it will. Not just well, but very well indeed!



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Angry Orpheus

All words are written in the same ink,
'flower' and 'power', say, are much the same,
and though I might write 'blood, blood, blood'
all over the page the paper would not be stained
nor would I bleed.

Philippe Jacottet,
'Chant d'en bas'

Elinor lay on her air mattress staring at the ceiling. She had quarrelled with Orpheus again, even though she knew she'd be punished with the cellar. Sent to bed early, Elinor! she thought bitterly. That was how her father used to punish her as a child when he caught her yet again with a book that he didn't think she should be reading at her age. Sent to bed early, sometimes at five in the afternoon. It had been particularly bad in summer, when the birds were singing and her sister was playing outside under the window – her sister who didn't care for books at all, but liked nothing so much as telling tales on Elinor when, instead of playing with her, she buried her head in a book that her father had said she mustn't read.

'Elinor, please don't quarrel with Orpheus!' Darius had tried drumming that into her so often, but no, she just couldn't control her temper! How could she be expected to, when his

wretched dog slobbered all over some of her most valuable books because his master never thought of putting them back on their shelves when he'd had his fun with them?

Recently, however, he hadn't been taking any more books off the shelves, not one. That at least was a small comfort. 'He just reads *Inkheart*,' Darius had whispered to her as they were washing the dishes together in the kitchen. Her dishwasher had gone wrong. As if it wasn't bad enough to be working as a kitchen-maid in her own house, now her hands were all swollen with washing-up water! 'He seems to be looking for words,' Darius whispered. 'Then he puts them together differently, writes them down, writes and writes, the wastepaper basket is brimming over. He keeps on trying, and then he reads what he's written out loud, and when nothing happens ...'

'Yes? Then what?'

'Oh, nothing,' Darius had said evasively, scrubbing away industriously at a pan encrusted with fat, but Elinor knew that if it was 'nothing' he wouldn't have turned so embarrassed and silent.

'Then what?' she repeated – and Darius, blushing to his ears, had finally told her. Then Orpheus threw her books, her wonderful books, at the walls. He flung them on the floor in his rage – now and then one even sailed out of the window – and all because he couldn't do what Meggie had done. *Inkheart* was closed to him, however lovingly he cooed and implored in his velvety voice, reading and rereading the sentences he so longed to slip between.

Of course, she had run straight off when she next heard him shouting. She'd gone to save her printed children. 'No!' Orpheus had yelled, so loudly that you could hear him in the kitchen. 'No, no, no! Let me in, you thrice-accursed thing! I sent Dustfinger back into you! Can't you understand that? What would you be without him? I gave you back Mortola and Basta! I've earned my reward, haven't I?'

The man built like a wardrobe wasn't standing outside the library door to stop Elinor. He was probably roaming the house yet again, to see if he could find something worth stealing after all. Not in a hundred years would it have occurred to him that the books were by far the most valuable things in the place. Later, Elinor couldn't remember the names she had called Orpheus. She remembered only the book he was holding in his raised hand, a beautiful edition of the poems of William Blake. And for all her furious insults, he threw it out of the window, while the wardrobe-man grabbed her from behind and dragged her to the cellar stairs.

Oh, Meggie! thought Elinor as she lay on the air mattress, staring up at the crumbling plaster on her cellar ceiling. Why didn't you take me with you? Why didn't you at least ask if I'd like to come too?



The Barn Owl

And every doctor must know that God has set a great mystery in the plants, if only because of the spirits and wild fancies that cast men into despair, and this aid comes not from the Devil but from Nature.

Paracelsus, *Works*

The sea. Meggie hadn't seen it since the day they drove back from Capricorn's village to Elinor's house with the fairies and brownies who were nothing but ashes now. 'This is where the physician I told you about lives,' said Dustfinger, when the bay appeared beyond the trees. It was beautiful. The sun made the water shimmer like green glass, foaming glass constantly shaped by the wind into new folds. It was a strong wind, driving veils of cloud over the blue sky, and it carried a scent of salt and distant islands. It would have gladdened the heart but for the bare hill in the distance rising above the wooded slopes, and the castle on top of the hill, broad and heavy as its master's face, in spite of its silvered rooftops and battlements.

'Yes, there it is,' said Dustfinger, when he saw Meggie's look of alarm. 'The Castle of Night. And the hill where it stands is called Mount Adder, what else? Bare as an old man's bald head, so no one can come close under the cover of trees. But don't worry, it's not quite as close as it looks.'

‘The towers,’ said Farid. ‘Are they really all pure silver?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Dustfinger. ‘Dug from the mountains, this one and others. Roast fowls, young women, fertile land ... and silver ... the Adderhead has a hearty appetite for many things.’

A broad, sandy beach edged the bay. Where it joined the trees a long wall and a tower rose, sand-coloured and inconspicuous. There was not a soul to be seen on the beach, no boat was drawn up on the pale sand, only that building – the low tower and the long, tiled rooftops hardly visible behind the wall. A path wound towards it like a viper’s trail, but Dustfinger led them round to the back of the building under cover of the trees. He beckoned impatiently to them before disappearing into the shadow of the wall. The wood of the door outside which he was waiting for them was weathered, and the bell hanging above it was rusty with the salty wind. Wild flowers grew near the door, faded blossoms and brown seed-heads with a fairy nibbling at them. She had paler skin than her woodland sisters.

It all seemed so peaceful. The buzz of a wasp reached Meggie’s ear, mingling with the roaring of the sea, but she remembered only too well how peaceful the mill had looked. Dustfinger had not forgotten it either. He stood there listening intently before he finally put out his hand and pulled the chain of the rusty bell. His leg was bleeding again – Meggie saw him press his hand to it – but nonetheless he had kept urging them to make haste on the way to this place. ‘There’s no better physician,’ was all he would say when Farid asked where he was taking them, ‘and none we can trust more. In addition, it’s not far from there to the Castle of Night, and that’s where Meggie still wants to go, doesn’t she?’ He had given them some leaves to eat, downy and bitter. ‘Get them down inside you,’ he said when they made faces of disgust. ‘You can stay where we’re going only if you have at least five of them in your belly.’

The wooden door opened just a crack, and a woman peered through. ‘By all good spirits!’ Meggie heard her whisper, and

then the door opened and a thin, wrinkled hand beckoned them in. The woman who quickly closed it behind them again was just as wrinkled and thin as her hand, and she stared at Dustfinger as if he had fallen straight from heaven.

‘Yesterday! He said so yesterday!’ she exclaimed. ‘You wait and see, Bella, he’s back, that’s what he said. Who else would have set the mill ablaze? Who else talks to fire? He didn’t get a wink of sleep all night. He was worried, but you’re all right, aren’t you? What’s the matter with your leg?’

Dustfinger put a finger to his mouth, but Meggie saw that he was smiling. ‘It could be better,’ he said quietly. ‘And you talk as fast as ever, Bella, but could you take us to the Barn Owl now?’

‘Yes, yes, of course!’ Bella sounded slightly injured. ‘I suppose you have that horrible marten in there?’ she enquired, with a distrustful look at Dustfinger’s rucksack. ‘Don’t you go letting him out.’

‘Of course not,’ Dustfinger assured her, casting a glance at Farid which obviously warned him to say nothing about the second marten asleep in his own rucksack.

Without another word, the old woman beckoned to them to follow her down a dark, unadorned colonnade. She took small, hasty footsteps, as if she were a squirrel wearing a long dress of coarsely woven fabric. ‘A good thing you came round the back way,’ she said in a lowered voice as she led them past a series of closed doors. ‘I’m afraid the Adderhead has ears even here now, but luckily he doesn’t pay his informers well enough for them to work in the wing where we treat infectious cases. I hope you gave those two enough of the leaves?’

‘Yes, indeed.’ Dustfinger nodded, but Meggie saw that he looked around uneasily, and inconspicuously put another of the leaves that he had given them in his own mouth. Not until they passed the fragile figures sunning themselves in the courtyard around which the colonnade ran did Meggie realize just where

Dustfinger had brought them. It was an infirmary. Farid put his hand to his mouth in horror when they met an old man who looked as pale as if Death had come for him long ago, and he replied to the man's toothless smile with only a frightened nod.

'Don't look as if you were about to fall down dead!' Dustfinger whispered to him, although he didn't look particularly comfortable here either. 'Your fingers will be well tended here, and moreover we'll be relatively safe, which is more than can be said for many places on this side of the forest.'

'Yes, if there's one thing the Adderhead fears,' added Bella in knowing tones, 'it's death and the diseases that lead to it. All the same, you shouldn't let either the patients or the nurses here see more of you than they must. If there's one thing I've learned in life it's never to trust anyone. Except the Barn Owl, of course.'

'And what about me, Bella?' asked Dustfinger.

'You least of all!' was her only reply. She stopped at a plain wooden door. 'It's a pity your face is so unmistakable,' she told Dustfinger, low-voiced, 'or you could have put on a show for our patients. Nothing does the sick more good than a little pleasure.' Then she knocked on the door and, with a nod, stepped aside.

The room on the other side of the door was dark, for the only window was half hidden behind stacks of books. It was the kind of room Mo would have loved. He liked books to look as if someone had only just put them down. Quite unlike Elinor, he saw nothing wrong in leaving them lying there open, waiting for the next reader. The Barn Owl seemed to feel the same. He could hardly be spotted among all those piled books – a small man with short-sighted eyes and broad hands. He looked to Meggie like a mole, except that his hair was grey.

'Didn't I say so?' He knocked two books off their stacks as he hurried towards Dustfinger. "He's back," I said, but they

wouldn't believe it. Obviously the White Women are letting more and more of the dead come back to life these days!'

The two men embraced. Then the Barn Owl took a step back and looked Dustfinger thoroughly up and down. The physician was an old man, older than Fenoglio, but his eyes were as young as Farid's. 'You look all right,' he commented, pleased. 'Except for your leg. What's the matter with it? Did you get that injury at the mill? One of my women healers was taken up to the castle yesterday to tend two men bitten by fire. She brought back a strange story about an ambush, and a horned marten that spits fire ...'

Up to the castle? Instinctively, Meggie moved towards the physician. 'Did she see the prisoners too?' she interrupted him. 'They would just have been taken there – strolling players, men and women. My mother and father are with them.'

The Barn Owl looked at her sympathetically. 'Are you the girl that the Black Prince's men told me about? Your father—'

'– is the man they take for the Bluejay,' Dustfinger finished the sentence. 'Do you know how he and the other prisoners are?'

Before the Barn Owl could answer, a girl put her head round the door. She stared at the strangers in alarm. Her eyes lingered on Meggie so long that finally the Barn Owl cleared his throat.

'What is it, Carla?' he asked.

The girl bit her pale lips nervously. 'I'm to ask if we have any eyebright left,' she said timidly.

'Of course. Go to Bella and she'll give you some, but now leave us alone.'

The girl disappeared with a hasty nod, but she left the door open. Sighing, the Barn Owl closed it and then bolted it too. 'Where were we? Oh yes, the prisoners. The physician responsible for the dungeons is looking after them. He's useless at his job, but who else could stand it up there? Instead of

healing the sick he has to preside over whippings and lashings. Luckily they're not letting him near your father, and the Adderhead's own physician isn't going to soil his fingers on a prisoner, so my best woman healer goes up to the castle every day to tend him.'

'How is my father?' Meggie tried not to sound like a little girl holding back her tears with difficulty, but she didn't entirely succeed.

'He's badly wounded, but I think you know that?'

Meggie nodded. And the tears came again, flowing and flowing as if to wash it all out of her heart: her grief, her longing, her fear. Farid put his arm round her shoulders, but that just reminded her of Mo even more – of all the years he had protected her and held her close. And now that he was in trouble, she wasn't with him.

'He's lost a great deal of blood, and he's still weak, but he's doing well – much better, anyway, than we let the Adderhead know.' You could tell from the Barn Owl's voice that he often had to talk to people who were anxious about those they loved. 'My healer has advised him not to let anyone notice, to give us more time. But at the moment there really is nothing for you to worry about.'

Meggie's heart soared. *It will be all right*, something inside her said – for the first time since Dustfinger had given her Resa's note. *Everything will be all right!* Feeling embarrassed, she wiped the tears off her face.

'The weapon that wounded your father – my healer says it must be a terrible thing,' the Barn Owl continued. 'I hope the Adderhead's armourers are not working on some diabolical invention in secret!'

'No, that weapon was from a very different place.' And nothing good comes from that place, said Dustfinger's face, but Meggie didn't want to think of what a gun could do to this world just now. Her thoughts were with Mo.

‘My father,’ she told the Barn Owl, ‘would like this room very much. He loves books, and yours are really beautiful. Although he’d probably tell you that some of them needed rebinding, and that one won’t live much longer if you don’t soon do something about the beetles eating it.’

The Barn Owl picked up the book she had pointed out and caressed the pages just as Mo always did. ‘The Bluejay loves books?’ he asked. ‘Unusual for a robber.’

‘He’s not a robber,’ said Meggie. ‘He’s a doctor like you, only he heals books instead of people.’

‘Really? Then is it true that the Adderhead had captured the wrong man? In that case, I suppose when they say your father killed Capricorn, that isn’t true either?’

‘Oh yes, that’s true.’ Dustfinger looked out of the window as if he saw the scene of Capricorn’s festivities outside. ‘And all he needed to do it was his voice. You ought to get him or his daughter to read to you some time. Afterwards, I assure you, you’ll see your books in a very different light. You might well close and padlock them.’

‘Really?’ The Barn Owl looked at Meggie with great interest, as if he would like to hear more about Capricorn’s death, but there was another knock. This time a man’s voice came through the bolted door. ‘Will you come, master? We’ve prepared everything, but it will be better if you make the incision.’

Meggie saw Farid turn pale. ‘Just coming!’ said the Barn Owl. ‘You go ahead. I hope I can welcome your father to this room some day,’ he said to Meggie as he went to the door. ‘For you’re right: my books could certainly do with a doctor. Does the Black Prince have any plans for the prisoners?’ He looked enquiringly at Dustfinger.

‘No. No, I don’t think so. Have you heard anything about the other captives? Meggie’s mother is among them.’ It gave Meggie a pang that Dustfinger, and not she, had been the one to ask about Resa.

‘No, I don’t know anything about the others,’ replied the Barn Owl. ‘But now you must excuse me. I am sure Bella’s already told you that you had better keep to this part of the building. The Adderhead is spending more and more of his silver on informers. No place in Argenta is safe from them, not even this one.’

‘I know.’ Dustfinger picked up one of the books lying on the Barn Owl’s table. It was a herbal. Meggie could imagine how Elinor would have looked at it – full of longing to own it – and Mo would have run a finger over the painted pages as if he could feel the brush that had conjured up the fine lines of the pictures on paper. But what was Dustfinger thinking of? The herbs in Roxane’s fields? ‘Believe me, I wouldn’t have come here but for what happened at the mill,’ he said. ‘No one would want to bring danger to this place, but we’ll be gone again this very day.’

However, the Barn Owl wouldn’t hear of it. ‘Nonsense, you must stay until your leg and the boy’s fingers are better,’ he said. ‘You know how glad I am you came. And I’m glad you have the boy with you too. Did you know,’ he asked, turning to Farid, ‘he’s never had a pupil before? I was always telling him that a master must pass on his art, but he wouldn’t listen to me. I pass mine on to many, and that’s why I must leave you now. I have to show a pupil how to cut a foot off without killing the man it’s attached to.’

Farid stared at him, horrified. ‘Cut it off?’ he whispered. ‘How do you mean, cut it off?’ But the Barn Owl had already closed the door behind him.

‘Didn’t I tell you?’ said Dustfinger, feeling his injured thigh. ‘The Barn Owl is a first-class sawbones. But I think we’ll be allowed to keep our own fingers and feet.’

After Bella had treated Farid’s blisters and Dustfinger’s leg, she took them to a remote room, close to the door through which they had entered the building. Meggie liked the prospect of

sleeping under a roof again, but Farid was not at all comfortable with the idea. Looking unhappy, he squatted on the lavender-strewn floor, chewing one of the bitter leaves with determination. 'Can't we sleep on the beach tonight? I should think the sand would be nice and soft,' he asked Dustfinger, who was stretching out on one of the straw mattresses. 'Or in the forest?'

'If you like,' replied Dustfinger. 'But let me sleep now. And stop looking as if I'd brought you among cannibals, or I won't show you what I promised tomorrow night.'

'Tomorrow?' Farid spat the leaf out into his hand. 'Why not tonight?'

'Because it's too windy now,' said Dustfinger, turning his back on him, 'and because my damned leg hurts ... do you need any more reasons?'

Remorsefully, Farid shook his head, put the leaf back in his mouth and stared at the door as if Death in person might walk in any moment. But Meggie just sat there in the bare room, repeating to herself, over and over, what the Barn Owl had said about Mo: *he's doing well – much better, anyway, than we let the Adderhead know ... at the moment there really is nothing for you to worry about.*

When twilight fell, Dustfinger limped outside. He leaned against a column and looked up at the hill where the Castle of Night stood. Never moving, he gazed at the silver towers – and Meggie asked herself, for what was surely the hundredth time, if he was helping her only for her mother's sake. Perhaps Dustfinger himself didn't know.

In the Dungeon of the Castle of Night

They say:
Speak for us (to whom?)
Some say: Avenge us (on whom?)
Some say: take our place.
Some say: Witness
Others say (and these are women)
Be happy for us.

Margaret Atwood,
'Down', *Eating Fire*

Mina was crying again. Resa took the other woman in her arms as if she were still a child, hummed a tune and rocked her as she sometimes rocked Meggie, although by now her daughter was almost as tall as Resa herself.

A girl came twice a day, a thin, nervous little thing, younger than Meggie, to bring them bread and water. Sometimes there was porridge too, cold and sticky, but it filled the stomach – and reminded Resa of the days when Mortola had locked her up for something she had or hadn't done. The porridge had tasted just like this. When she asked the girl about the Bluejay, the child just ducked her head in fright and left Resa in fear – the

fear that Mo was dead by now, that they had hanged him, up there in the huge courtyard, and the last thing he had seen in this world was not her face, but the silver vipers' heads with their tongues licking down from the walls. Sometimes she saw it all so clearly in her mind's eye that she put her hands over her eyes, but the pictures were still there. And the darkness around her made her think it could all have been a dream: that moment at Capricorn's festivities when she had suddenly seen Mo standing beside Meggie, the year in Elinor's house, all that happiness – just a dream.

At least she was not alone. Even if the glances of the others were often hostile, their voices brought her out of her dark thoughts for a brief while. Now and then someone told a story, to keep them from hearing the weeping from the other cells, the scurrying of rats, the screams, the stammering voices that had long since ceased to make sense. Usually it was the women who told stories. Stories of love and death, betrayal and friendship, but they all ended happily, lights in the darkness, like the candles in Resa's pocket with wicks that had now become damp. Resa told fairy-tales that Mo had read aloud to her long, long ago, when Meggie's fingers were still soft and tiny, and the written word held no terrors for any of them yet. As for the strolling players, they told tales of the world around them: of Cosimo the Fair and his battle with the fire-raisers, of the Black Prince and how he found his bear, and his friend the fire-dancer, the man who made sparks rain down and fiery flowers blossom in the darkest night. Benedicta sang a song about him in a soft voice, a beautiful song, and in the end even Twofingers joined in, until the warder banged his stick against the bars and told them to keep quiet.

'I saw him once,' whispered Benedicta when the warder had gone away again. 'Many years ago, when I was a little girl. It was wonderful. The fire was so bright that even my eyes could see it. They say he's dead.'

‘No, he isn’t,’ said Resa quietly. ‘Who do you think made the tree across the road burn?’ They looked at her so incredulously! But she was too tired to tell them any more. She was too tired to explain anything. Let me go to my husband, that was all she wanted to say. Let me go to my child. Don’t tell me any more stories, tell me how they are. Please.

Someone did at last give her news of Meggie and Mo, but Resa would rather have heard it from any other mouth.

The others were asleep when Mortola came. She had two soldiers with her. Resa was awake, because she was seeing those pictures again, pictures of Mo being brought into the courtyard, having the rope put around his neck ... *he’s dead, and she has come to tell me!* That was her first thought when the Magpie stood before her with a triumphant smile.

‘Well, well, here’s our faithless maid!’ said Mortola as Resa got to her feet, with difficulty. ‘You seem to be as much of a witch as your daughter. How have you kept him alive? Perhaps I took aim a little too hastily. Never mind. A few more weeks and he’ll be strong enough for his execution!’

Alive.

Resa turned her head away so that Mortola wouldn’t see the smile that stole over her lips, but the Magpie was not looking at her face. She was enjoying the sight of her torn dress and bleeding, bare feet.

‘The Bluejay!’ Mortola lowered her voice. ‘Of course, I haven’t told the Adderhead that he’s going to execute the wrong man – why should I? It’s all working out just as I wanted. And I shall get my hands on your daughter too.’

Meggie. The sense of happiness that had briefly warmed Resa’s heart disappeared as suddenly as it had come. Beside her, Mina sat up, woken by Mortola’s hoarse voice.

‘Oh yes, I have powerful friends in this world,’ continued the Magpie, with a self-satisfied smile. ‘The Adderhead has caught me your husband, why wouldn’t he catch me your witch of a

daughter too? Do you know how I've convinced him that she's a witch? By showing him a photograph of her. Yes, Resa, I let Basta take the photos of your little darling with him, all those pretty silver-framed photographs standing around the bookworm woman's house. Of course the Adderhead thinks they're magic pictures, mirror images captured on paper. His soldiers are afraid to touch them, but they're showing them around all over the place. A pity we can't duplicate them as we could in your world! But fortunately your daughter has joined forces with Dustfinger, and there's no need for any magic picture of him. Every peasant has heard of him – him and his scars.'

'He'll protect her!' said Resa. She had to say something.

'Oh yes? The way he protected *you*?'

Resa dug her fingers into the fabric of her dirty dress. There was no one, in either this or the other world, that she hated as much as the Magpie. Not even Basta. It was Mortola who had taught her how to hate. 'Everything is different here,' she managed to say. 'Fire obeys him here, and he's not alone as he was in the other world. He has friends.'

'Friends! Ah, I suppose you mean the other mountebanks: the Black Prince, as he calls himself, and the rest of that rabble!' Contemptuously, the Magpie scanned the other prisoners.

They had almost all woken up. 'Look at them, Resa!' said Mortola spitefully. 'How are they going to help you out of here? With a few brightly coloured balls, or a couple of sentimental songs? One of them gave you away, did you know that? And as for Dustfinger, what could he do? Unleash fire to save you? It would burn you too, and he certainly won't risk that, besotted with you as he always was.' She leaned forward with a smile. 'Did you ever tell your husband what good friends you two were?'

Resa did not reply. She knew Mortola's games. She knew them very well.

‘What do you think? Shall I tell him?’ Mortola whispered, ready to pounce, like a cat waiting by a mousehole.

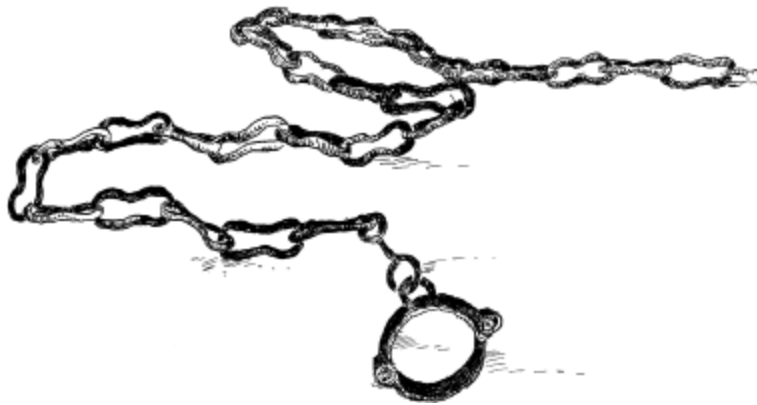
‘Do that,’ Resa whispered back. ‘Tell him. You can’t tell him anything he doesn’t know already. I’ve given him back the years you stole from us, word for word, day after day. And Mo knows, too, that your own son made you live in his cellar, and let everyone think you were only his housekeeper.’

Mortola tried to hit her in the face, as she had so often done before, as she had done to all her maids – right in the middle of the face – but Resa caught her hand before it landed.

‘He’s alive, Mortola!’ she whispered to the Magpie. ‘This story isn’t over yet, and his death isn’t written anywhere in it – but my daughter will whisper yours in your ear when she hears what you did to her father. You’ll see one day. And then I shall watch *you* die.’

This time she didn’t manage to catch Mortola’s hand, and her cheek was still burning long after the Magpie had gone away. She felt the eyes of the other prisoners like fingers feeling her face when she was sitting on the cold ground again. Mina was the first to say something. ‘Where did you meet the old woman? She mixed poisons for Capricorn.’

‘I know,’ said Resa tonelessly. ‘I belonged to her. For many long years.’



A Letter from Fenoglio

Is there then a world
Where I rule absolutely on fate?
A time I bind with chains of signs?
An existence become endless at my bidding?

Wislaw Szymborska,
'The joy of writing',
View with a Grain of Sand

Dustfinger was asleep when Roxane arrived. It was already growing dark outside. Farid and Meggie had gone out to the beach, but he was lying down because his leg was hurting. When he saw Roxane standing in the doorway he thought at first his imagination was playing tricks on him, as it so often did by night. After all, he had once been here with her, very long ago. The room they had then had looked almost the same, and he had been lying on a straw mattress just like this, his face slashed and sticky with his own blood.

Roxane was wearing her hair loose. Perhaps that was why she woke the memory of that other night. His heart always seemed to miss a beat at the mere thought of it. He had been mad with pain and fear, had crawled away like a wounded animal, until Roxane found him and brought him here. At first the Barn Owl had hardly recognized him. He had given him

something to drink that made him sleep, and when he woke again Roxane had been standing in the doorway, just as she was standing now. When the cuts would not heal, for all the physician's skill, she had gone into the forest with him, deeper and deeper into the forest to find the fairies – and she had stayed with him until his face was healed well enough for him to venture among other people again. There could be few men whose love for a woman had been written on his face with a knife.

But what was his greeting when she suddenly appeared? 'What are you doing here?' he asked. Then he could have bitten his tongue off. Why didn't he say how much he had missed her, so much that he had almost turned back a dozen times?

'Yes, indeed, what am I doing here?' Roxane asked back. Once she would have turned her back on him for such a question, but now she just smiled, so mockingly that he felt as awkward as a boy.

'Where have you left Jehan?'

'With a friend.' She kissed him. 'What's the matter with your leg? Fenoglio told me you were wounded.'

'It's getting better. What do you have to do with Fenoglio?'

'You don't like him. Why not?' Roxane stroked his face. How beautiful she looked. So very beautiful.

'Let's just say he had plans for me that I didn't care for in the least. Has the old man by any chance given you something for Meggie? A letter, for instance?'

Without a word, she brought it out from under her cloak.

There the words were – words that wanted to come true. Roxane offered him the sealed parchment, but Dustfinger shook his head. 'You'd better give that to Meggie,' he said. 'She's down on the beach.'

Roxane glanced at him in surprise. 'You look almost as if you were afraid of a piece of parchment.'

‘Yes,’ said Dustfinger, reaching for her hand. ‘Yes, I am. Particularly when Fenoglio’s been writing on it. Come on, let’s go and look for Meggie.’

Meggie smiled awkwardly at Roxane when she gave her the parchment, and for a moment looked curiously from her to Dustfinger, but then she had eyes only for Fenoglio’s letter. She broke the seal so hastily that she almost tore the parchment. There were three closely-written sheets. The first was a letter to her. When she had read it Meggie put it away under her belt, paying it no further attention. The words she had been so eagerly waiting for filled the other two sheets. Meggie’s eyes travelled over the lines so fast that Dustfinger could hardly believe she was really reading them. Finally she raised her head, looked up at the Castle of Night – and smiled.

‘Well, what does the old devil say?’ asked Dustfinger.

Meggie offered him the two sheets. ‘It’s different from what I expected. Quite different, but it’s good. Here, read it for yourself.’

Gingerly, he took the parchment in his fingertips, as if he might burn himself on it more easily than on a flame. ‘When did you learn to read?’ Roxane’s voice sounded so surprised that he had to smile.

‘Meggie’s mother taught me.’ Fool; why was he telling her that? Roxane gave Meggie a long look as he laboured to decipher Fenoglio’s handwriting. Resa had usually written in capital letters, to make it easier for him.

‘It could work, couldn’t it?’ Meggie was looking over his shoulder.

The sea roared as if to agree with her. Yes, perhaps it really would work ... Dustfinger followed the written words like a dangerous path. But it *was* a path, and it led right into the middle of the Adderhead’s heart. However, Dustfinger didn’t

like the part the old man intended Meggie to play. After all, her mother had asked him to take care of her.

Farid looked unhappily at the letters. He still couldn't read. Sometimes Dustfinger felt that he suspected those tiny black signs of witchcraft. What else would he think of them, indeed, after all his experiences? 'Come on!' Farid shifted impatiently from foot to foot. 'What's he written?'

'Meggie will have to go to the castle. Straight into the Adder's nest.'

'What?' Horrified, the boy looked first at him and then at the girl. 'But that's impossible!' He took Meggie by the shoulders and turned her roughly round to face him. 'You can't go there. It's much too dangerous!'

Poor boy. Of course she would go. 'That's the way Fenoglio has written it,' she said, removing Farid's hands from her shoulders.

'Leave her alone,' said Dustfinger, giving Meggie the sheets of parchment back. 'When are you going to read it aloud?'

'Now.'

Of course. She didn't want to lose any time, and why should she? The sooner the story took a new turn, the better. It could hardly get worse.

Or could it?

'What's all this about?' Roxane looked from one to another of them, baffled. She scrutinized Farid without much friendliness; she still didn't like him. Dustfinger thought that wouldn't change until something convinced her that Farid was not his son. 'Explain!' she said. 'Fenoglio said this letter could save her parents. But what can a letter do for someone in a dungeon in the Castle of Night?'

Dustfinger stroked her hair back. He liked to see her wearing it loose again. 'Listen,' he said. 'I know it's difficult to believe, but if anything can open the dungeon doors in the Castle of

Night, it's this letter – and Meggie's voice. She can make ink live and breathe, Roxane, just as you can bring a song to life. Her father has the same gift. If the Adderhead knew that, then I imagine he'd have hanged him long ago. The words that Meggie's father used to kill Capricorn looked just as harmless as these.'

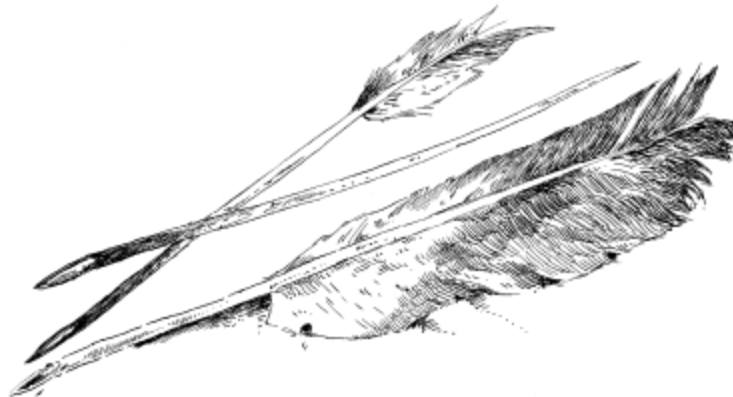
The way she was looking at him! As incredulously as she used to when he had yet again tried to explain where he had been for weeks on end. 'You mean magic, an inkspell?' she whispered.

'No. I mean reading aloud.'

She didn't understand a word of this, of course, which was not surprising. Perhaps she would if she heard Meggie read, if she saw the words suddenly trembling in the air, if she could smell them, feel them on her skin ...

'I'd like to be alone when I read it,' said Meggie, looking at Farid. Then she turned and went back to the infirmary with Fenoglio's letter in her hand. Farid wanted to follow her, but Dustfinger detained him.

'Let her!' he said. 'Do you think she'll disappear into the words? That's nonsense. We're all up to our necks in the story she's going to read anyway. She only wants to make sure the wind changes, and it will – if the old man has written the right words!'



The Wrong Ears

Song lies asleep in everything
That dreams the day and night away,
And the whole world itself will sing
If once the magic word you say.

Joseph von Eichendorff,
The Divining Rod

Roxane brought Meggie an oil lamp before leaving her alone in the room where they would be sleeping. ‘Written words need light, that’s the awkward thing about them,’ she said. ‘But if these words are really as important as you all say, I can understand that you want to read them alone. I’ve always thought my singing voice sounds best when I’m on my own too.’ She was already in the doorway when she added: ‘Your mother – do she and Dustfinger know each other well?’

Meggie almost replied: I don’t know. I never asked my mother. But at last she said: ‘They were friends.’ She did not mention the resentment she still felt when she thought how Dustfinger had known where Resa was, all those years, and hadn’t told Mo. But Roxane asked no more questions anyway. ‘If you need any help,’ was all she said before she left the room, ‘you’ll find me with the Barn Owl.’

Meggie waited until her footsteps along the dark corridor had died away. Then she sat down on one of the straw mattresses and put the sheets of parchment on her lap. What would it be like, she couldn't help thinking as the words lay spread out before her, simply to do it for fun, just once? What would it be like to feel the magic of the words on her tongue when it wasn't a matter of life or death, good or bad luck? Once, in Elinor's house, she had been almost unable to resist that temptation, when she had seen a book that she'd loved as a small child – a book with mice in frilly dresses and tiny suits making jam and going for picnics. She had stopped the first word forming on her lips by closing the book, though, because she'd suddenly seen some dreadful pictures in her mind. One of the dressed-up mice in Elinor's garden surrounded by its wild relations, who would never in a million years dream of making jam. And an image of a little frilly dress, complete with a grey tail, in the jaws of one of the cats that regularly roamed among Elinor's rhododendron bushes. Meggie had never brought anything out of the words on the page just for fun, and she wasn't going to do it this evening either.

'The whole secret, Meggie,' Mo had once told her, 'is in the breathing. It gives your voice strength and fills it with your life. And not just yours. Sometimes it feels as if when you take a breath you are breathing in everything around you, everything that makes up the world and moves it, and then it all flows into the words.' She tried it. She tried to breathe as calmly and deeply as the sea – the sound of the surf came into the room from outside – in and out, in and out, as if she could capture its power in her voice. The oil lamp that Roxane had brought in filled the bare room with warm light, and outside one of the women healers walked softly by.

'I'm just going on with the story!' whispered Meggie. 'I'm going on with the story. That's what it's waiting for. Come on!' She pictured the massive figure of the Adderhead pacing sleeplessly up and down in the Castle of Night, never guessing

that there was a girl who planned to whisper his name in Death's ear this very night.

She took the letter that Fenoglio had written her from her belt. It was as well that Dustfinger hadn't read it.

Dear Meggie, it said, I hope that what I'm sending won't disappoint you. It's odd, but I have found that obviously I can write only what doesn't contradict anything I wrote about the Inkworld earlier. I have to keep the rules I made myself, even though I often made them unconsciously.

I hope your father is all right. From what I hear he is now a prisoner in the Castle of Night – and I must admit that I am not entirely blameless there. Yes, I admit it. After all, as you will have found out by now, I used him as a living model for the Bluejay. I am sorry, but I really did think it was a good idea at the time. He made an excellent and noble robber in my imagination, and how could I guess that he would ever really come into my story? Well, be that as it may, he's here, and the Adderhead won't set him free just because I write a new passage saying so. I didn't make him that way, Meggie. The story must be true to itself, that's the only way to do it, so I can only send you these words. At first they may do no more than delay your father's execution, but I hope they will ultimately lead to his freedom after all. Trust me. I believe the words I enclose are the only possible way of bringing this story to a truly happy ending, and you like stories with happy endings, don't you?

Go on with my story, Meggie, before it goes on with itself!

I would have liked to bring you the words myself, but I have to keep an eye on Cosimo. I am rather afraid that in his case we made it a little too easy for ourselves. Take care of yourself, give my good wishes to your father when you see him again (which I hope will be soon), and to the boy who worships the ground under your feet too – oh yes, and tell Dustfinger, though I don't suppose he'll like it, that his wife is much too beautiful for him.

Love and kisses,

Fenoglio

P.S. Since your father is still alive, I have wondered whether perhaps the words I gave you for him in the forest worked after all? If so, Meggie, then that could be only because I made him one of my characters, in a way – which would mean that some good came of the whole Bluejay story, don't you think?

Oh, Fenoglio. What a master he was in the art of turning everything to his own advantage!

A breath of wind came through the window as Meggie reread the letter, making the sheets of parchment move as if the story itself were impatient and wanted to hear the new words. 'Yes, all right. Here I go,' whispered Meggie.

She had not often heard her father read aloud, but she remembered exactly how Mo gave every word the right sound, every single word ...

It was quiet in the room, very quiet. The whole Inkworld – every fairy, every tree, even the sea – seemed to be waiting for her voice. 'Night after night,' Meggie began, 'the Adderhead could get no rest. His wife slept soundly and deeply. She was his fifth wife, and younger than his three eldest daughters. Her body, pregnant with his child, was a mound under the bedclothes. It must be a boy this time; she had already borne him two daughters. If this child were another girl he would disown her, just as he had repudiated his other wives. He would send her back to her father, or to some lonely castle in the mountains.'

Why could she sleep, although she feared him, while he paced up and down the magnificent bedchamber like an old dancing bear in its cage?

Because he alone felt the truly great fear. The fear of Death.

Death waited outside the windows, outside the glass panes paid for by selling his strongest peasants. Death pressed its ugly face against them as soon as darkness swallowed up his castle like a snake swallowing a mouse. He had more torches lit every night, more candles, yet still the fear came – to make him shake and fall

on his knees because they trembled so much, to show him his future: the flesh falling from his bones, the worms eating him, the White Women leading him away. The Adderhead pressed his hands to his mouth so that the guards outside the door would not hear him sobbing. Fear. Fear of the end of all his days, fear of the void, fear, fear, fear. Fear that Death was already in his body somewhere, invisible, growing and flourishing and eating him away – the one enemy he could never defeat, never burn or stab or hang, the one enemy from whom there was no escaping.

One night, blacker and more endless than any that had gone before, the fear was particularly terrible, and he had them all woken, as he quite often did, all who were sleeping peacefully in their beds instead of trembling and sweating like him: his wife, the useless physicians, the petitioners, scribes, administrators, his herald, the silver-nosed minstrel. He had the cooks driven into the kitchen to prepare him a banquet, but as he was sitting at his table, his fingers dripping with fat from the freshly roasted meat, a girl came to the Castle of Night. She walked fearlessly past the guards and offered him a deal: a bargain with Death.

That was how it would be. Because she was reading it. How the words made their way out through Meggie's lips. As if they were weaving the future. Every sound, every character a thread ... Meggie forgot everything around her: the infirmary, the straw mattress she was sitting on, even Farid and his unhappy face as he watched her go. She went on spinning Fenoglio's story; that was why she was here, spinning it out of threads of sound with her breath and her voice – to save her father and her mother. And this whole strange world that had enchanted her.

When Meggie heard the agitated voices she thought at first that they were coming out of the words, but they grew louder and louder. Reluctantly, she raised her head. She hadn't read it all yet. There were still a few sentences waiting, waiting for her

to teach them to breathe. *Look at the words on the page, Meggie,* she told herself. *Concentrate!*

She gave a start when a dull knocking resounded through the infirmary. The voices grew louder, she heard hasty footsteps, and Roxane appeared in the doorway. 'They've come from the Castle of Night!' she whispered. 'They have a picture of you, a strange picture. Quick, come with me!'

Meggie tried to put the parchment in her sleeve until she could read those last few sentences, but then thought better of it and pushed it down the neck of her dress. She hoped it would not show under the firm fabric. She could still taste the words on her tongue, she still saw herself standing before the Adderhead just as she had read it, but Roxane reached for her hand and pulled her along. A woman's voice came down the colonnade, Bella's voice, and then the voice of a man, loud and commanding. Roxane did not let Meggie's hand go but led her on, past the doors behind which the patients slept, or else lay awake listening to their own heavy breathing.

The Barn Owl's room was empty. Roxane took Meggie in with her, bolted the door and looked around. The window was barred, and the steps were coming closer. Meggie thought she heard the Barn Owl's voice, and another voice, rough and threatening. Then, suddenly, there was silence. They had stopped outside the door. Roxane put her arm round Meggie's shoulders.

'They're going to take you with them!' she whispered as the Barn Owl talked to the intruders on the other side of the door. 'We'll send word to the Black Prince. He has spies in the castle. We'll try to help you, understand?'

Meggie just nodded.

Someone was hammering on the door. 'Open up, little witch, or do we have to come and get you?'

Books, books everywhere. Meggie retreated among the stacks of volumes. There wasn't a single book here she could have

gone to for help, even if she'd wanted to. The knowledge in them could give her no aid. She'd have needed a story for that, but she remembered looking for a suitable story in vain in Capricorn's house. She glanced at Roxane in search of help – and saw the same helplessness on Roxane's face too.

What would happen if they took her away with them? So many sentences were still unread. Meggie tried desperately to remember just where she had been interrupted ...

More hammering on the door. The wood groaned; it would soon splinter and break. Meggie went to the door, pushed the bolt back and opened it. She couldn't count the soldiers standing out in the narrow corridor, but there were a great many of them. They were led by Firefox; Meggie recognized him in spite of the scarf he had tied over his mouth and nose. They all had such scarves wound round their faces, and their eyes above them were terrified. I hope you've all caught the plague here, thought Meggie. I hope you die like flies. The soldier beside Firefox stumbled back as if he had heard her thoughts, but it was Meggie's face that frightened him. 'Witch!' he exclaimed, staring at what Firefox held in his hand. Meggie recognized the narrow silver frame at once. It was her photo, from Elinor's library.

A murmur arose among the men-at-arms. But Firefox put his hand roughly under her chin, making her turn her face to him. 'I thought so. You're the girl from the stable,' he said. 'I'll admit you didn't look to me like a witch there!' Meggie tried to turn her head away, but Firefox's hand did not let go. 'Well done!' he said to a girl who was standing among the men-at-arms looking lost. Her feet were bare, and she wore the same plain tunic as all the women who worked in the infirmary. Carla, wasn't that her name?

She bent her head and looked at the piece of silver that the soldier pressed into her hand as if she'd never seen such a beautiful, shiny coin before. 'He said I'd get work,' she

whispered almost inaudibly. 'In the castle kitchen. The minstrel with the silver nose said so.'

Firefox shrugged scornfully. 'You've come to the wrong man here,' he said, turning his back to her heedlessly. 'And this time I'm to take you too, sawbones,' he said to the Barn Owl. 'You've let the wrong sort of visitors through your gate once too often. I told the Adderhead it was high time to light a fire here, a great fire. I can still do that kind of thing extremely well, but he wouldn't hear of it. Someone's told him his death will come out of a fire. Since then he won't let us light anything but candles.' There was no missing his contempt for his master's weakness.

The Barn Owl looked at Meggie. *I'm sorry*, said his eyes. And she read a question in them too: *where's Dustfinger?* Yes, where?

'Let me go with her.' Roxane went up to Meggie and tried to put an arm round her shoulders again, but Firefox pushed her roughly back.

'Only the girl in the witch picture,' he said, 'and the physician.'

Roxane, Bella and a few of the other women followed them to the gate leading out to the sea. The surf shone in the moonlight, and the beach lay there deserted, except for a few footprints which no one, luckily, examined closely. The soldiers had brought horses for their prisoners. Meggie's laid its ears back when one of the soldiers put her on its back. Only when it was trotting towards the mountains with her did she dare to look surreptitiously around. But there was no sign of Dustfinger and Farid. Except for the footprints in the sand.



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Fire and Water

And what is word knowledge but a shadow of wordless knowledge?

**Khalil Gibran,
*The Prophet***

All was quiet behind the walls of the infirmary when Dustfinger gestured to Farid to come out from among the trees. No weeping, no cursing the men who had come from the Castle of Night. Most of the women had gone back to the sick and dying. Only Roxane still stood on the beach, looking at the path the soldiers had taken.

She went to Dustfinger, her footsteps weary.

‘I’ll go after them!’ stammered Farid beside him, his fists clenched. ‘At least there’s no missing that accursed castle!’

‘What do you think you’re talking about, damn it?’ Dustfinger snapped at him. ‘Do you believe you can just walk through the gates? That is the Castle of Night, where they stick chopped-off heads on the battlements.’

Farid ducked his head and stared up at the silver towers. They rose to the sky as if to impale the stars.

‘But ... but Meggie,’ he stammered.

‘Yes, all right, we’ll follow her,’ said Dustfinger, irritation in his voice. ‘My leg’s already looking forward to the climb. But we’re not stumbling off just like that. You have something to learn yet.’

The relief in the boy’s face when he looked at him – as if he were delighted at the prospect of creeping into the Adder’s nest! Dustfinger could only shake his head at such idiocy.

‘Something to learn? What?’

‘What I was going to show you anyway.’ Dustfinger went towards the water. He wished his leg would hurry up and heal.

Roxane followed him. ‘You two are going after them? What are you talking about?’ Fear and rage were mingled on her face as she came between him and the boy. ‘You can’t go to the castle! There’s no more you can do! Either for the girl, or for the Barn Owl, or for any of the others. Your wonderful letter came to nothing, nothing at all!’

‘We’ll see,’ was all Dustfinger would reply. ‘It depends whether Meggie read it out, and if so, how far she got.’

He tried to move her aside, but Roxane pushed his hands away. ‘Let’s send a message to the Black Prince!’ There was desperation in her voice. ‘Have you forgotten all the fire-raisers up there at the castle? You’ll be dead before the sun rises! What about Basta? What about Firefox and the Piper? Someone is bound to recognize your face!’

‘Who says I’m going to show my face?’ he replied.

Roxane flinched back. She cast Farid such a hostile glance that the boy turned away. ‘But that’s our secret. You’ve never shown anyone but me before. And you yourself said you’re the only one who can do it!’

‘The boy will be able to do it too!’

The sand crunched under his feet as he walked towards the waves. He did not stop until the surf was washing around his boots.

‘What’s she talking about?’ asked Farid. ‘What are you going to show me? Is it very difficult?’

Dustfinger looked round. Roxane was walking slowly back to the infirmary. She disappeared behind the plain wooden gate without once turning.

‘What is it?’ Impatiently, Farid tugged at his sleeve. ‘Tell me.’

Dustfinger turned his back to him. ‘Fire and water,’ he said, ‘don’t really mix. You could say they’re incompatible. But when they do love each other, they love passionately.’

It was a long time since he had last spoken the words he now whispered. But the fire understood. A flame licked up between the wet pebbles that the sea had washed up on the sand. Dustfinger bent and enticed it into the hollow of his hand as if it were a young bird, whispered, told it what he wanted, promised it a nocturnal game such as it had never played before ... and when it answered, crackling, flaring up, so hot that it burned his skin, he threw it into the foaming sea, fingers outstretched as if he still held the fire on invisible strings. The water snapped at the flame like a fish snapping at a fly, but the fire only burned brighter, while Dustfinger, standing on the shore, spread his arms wide.

Hissing and flaring, the fire imitated him, moving to left and right along the sea-wave, further and further, until the surf, now rimmed with flames, rolled towards the shore, and a band of fire was washed up at Dustfinger’s feet like a love token. He plunged both hands into the blazing foam, and when he straightened up again he held a fairy fluttering in his fingers, as blue as her forest sisters but surrounded by a fiery lustre, and her eyes were as red as the flames from which she was born. Dustfinger held her in his hands like a rare moth, waited for the prickling of his skin, the heat running up his arms as if he suddenly had liquid fire instead of blood in his veins. Not until it had burned its way right up to his armpits did he let the tiny creature fly away, chattering and swearing crossly, as they

always did when you lured them to you by making the sea play with fire.

‘What’s that?’ asked Farid in alarm, looking at Dustfinger’s blackened hands and arms.

Dustfinger took a cloth from his belt and carefully rubbed the soot into his skin. ‘That,’ he said, ‘is something that will get us into the castle. But the soot works only if you get it from the fairies for yourself. So it’s your turn now.’

Farid looked at him incredulously. ‘But I can’t do that!’ he stammered. ‘I don’t know how you did it.’

‘Nonsense!’ Dustfinger stepped back from the water and sat down on the damp sand. ‘Of course you can do it! Just think of Meggie!’

Undecided, Farid looked up at the castle, while the waves licked his bare toes as if inviting him to play.

‘Won’t they see the fire up there?’

‘The castle is further away than it looks. Believe me, your feet will show you that when we start climbing. And if the guards up there do see anything they’ll think it’s lightning, or fire-elves dancing over the water. When did you start thinking so hard before you began to play? All I can say is, if you wait much longer I shall certainly start remembering what a crazy notion going up there is.’

That convinced Farid.

The flame went out three times when he threw it into the breakers. But at the fourth attempt the waves were rimmed with fire for him as he had demanded – perhaps not quite such bright fire as they had made for Dustfinger, but the sea burned for Farid too. And for the second time that night, fire and water played together.

‘Well done,’ said Dustfinger, as the boy looked proudly at the soot on his arms. ‘Spread it well over your chest and legs and face.’

‘Why?’ Farid looked at him, wide-eyed.

‘Because it will make us invisible,’ replied Dustfinger, rubbing soot into his own face. ‘Until sunrise.’



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Invisible as the Wind

‘So sorry, your bloodiness, Mr Baron, sir,’ he said greasily. ‘My mistake, my mistake – I didn’t see you – of course I didn’t, you’re invisible – forgive old Peevsie his little joke, sir.’

**J.K. Rowling,
*Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone***

It was an odd feeling, being invisible. Farid felt all-powerful and lost at the same time. As if he were nowhere and everywhere. The worst of it was that he couldn’t see Dustfinger. He had to rely on his hearing. ‘Dustfinger?’ he kept whispering as he followed him through the night, and every time a quiet reply came back: ‘I’m here, right in front of you.’

The soldiers who had taken Meggie and the Barn Owl with them would have to follow a road – a bad one, almost entirely overgrown in many places – that wound up into the hills, bending and curving. Dustfinger, on the other hand, was making his way across country and up slopes too steep for horses, especially when they had to carry armed riders. Farid tried not to think how much it must be hurting Dustfinger’s leg. Now and then he heard him swearing quietly, and he kept stopping, invisible, nothing but a breathing in the night.

The castle was indeed further away than it had looked from the beach, but finally its walls towered to the sky right in front of them. By comparison with this fortress, the castle of Ombra seemed to Farid like a toy, built by a prince who liked to eat and drink but had no intention of going to war. In the Castle of Night, every stone seemed to have been set in place with war in mind, and as Farid followed the sound of Dustfinger's gasping breaths, he pictured to himself, with horror, what it must be like to storm up the steep slope with hot pitch raining down on you from the battlements above, and bolts from crossbows flying your way.

Morning was still far off when they reached the castle gate. They still had a few precious hours of invisibility left, but the gate was shut, and Farid felt tears of disappointment fill his eyes. 'It's closed!' he whispered. 'They've taken them into the castle already! Now what?' Every breath hurt him, they had travelled so fast. But what good did it do them now to be as transparent as glass, as invisible as the wind?

He sensed Dustfinger's body beside him, warm in the windy night. 'Of course it's closed!' his voice whispered. 'What did you expect? Did you think the two of us would overtake them? We wouldn't have done that even if I wasn't hobbling like an old woman! But you wait: they're sure to open the gate for someone else tonight. Even if it's only one of their informers.'

'Or maybe we could climb in?' Farid looked hopefully up at the pale grey walls. He saw the guards on the battlements, armed with spears.

'Climb in? You really do seem to be head over heels in love. Can't you see how smooth and high these walls are? Forget it – we'll wait.'

Six gallows towered in front of them. Dead men hung from four of them. Farid was thankful that in the darkness they just looked like bundles of old clothes. 'Damn it!' he heard Dustfinger murmur. 'Why doesn't the fairy venom make your

fear go away as well as your body?’ The same thing had occurred to Farid too, but he was not afraid of the guards, Basta or Firefox. His fear, his terrible fear was for Meggie. Being invisible only made it worse. There seemed to be nothing left of him but the pain in his heart.

A chilly wind was blowing tonight, and Farid was just breathing on his invisible fingers to warm them when hoofbeats echoed through the dark.

‘There, now!’ whispered Dustfinger. ‘Looks like we’re in luck for a change! Remember, whatever happens, we must be out of here before daybreak. The sun will make us visible again almost as fast as you can summon fire.’

The hoofbeats grew louder, and a horseman emerged from the darkness – not in the Adderhead’s pale silver, but clothed in red and black. ‘Well, would you believe it?’ whispered Dustfinger. ‘Sootbird, no less!’

One of the guards called something down from the battlements, and Sootbird replied.

‘Come on!’ Dustfinger hissed to Farid as the gate swung open, creaking. They followed so close to Sootbird that Farid could have touched his horse’s tail. Traitor, he thought, filthy traitor! He would have liked to drag him down from the saddle, put a knife to his throat, and ask what news he was bringing to the Castle of Night – but Dustfinger thrust him on, through the gigantic gate and into the courtyard. He led Farid onwards as Sootbird rode to the castle stables. They were swarming with men-at-arms. Obviously the Castle of Night was as wakeful as its master was said to be.

‘Listen!’ whispered Dustfinger, drawing Farid under an arch. ‘This castle is the size of a city and as full of nooks and crannies as a labyrinth. Mark the way you go with soot. I don’t want to have to search for you later because you’re lost like a child in the forest, understand?’

‘But what about Sootbird? He gave the Secret Camp away, didn’t he?’

‘Very likely. But forget him for now. Think of Meggie.’

‘But he was among the prisoners!’ A troop of soldiers marched past them. Farid flinched back in alarm. He still couldn’t believe that they really did not see him.

‘So?’ Dustfinger’s voice sounded like the wind itself speaking. ‘It’s the oldest disguise in the world for traitors. Where do you hide your informer? Among your victims. I expect the Piper told him once or twice what a magnificent fire-eater he was, and then they were best friends. Sootbird’s always had peculiar taste in friends. Well, come on, or we’ll still be standing here when the sun melts our invisibility off us.’

That made Farid look instinctively up at the sky. It was a dark night. Even the moon seemed lost in all the blackness, and he could not take his eyes off the silver towers.

‘The Adder’s nest!’ he whispered – and felt Dustfinger’s invisible hand drawing him on again, none too gently.

The Adderhead

Thoughts of death
Crowd over my happiness
Like dark clouds
Over the silver sickle of the moon.

St. Brown,
Poems to Read

The Adderhead was at table when Firefox brought Meggie to him. Exactly as she had read it in the story. The hall where he was feasting was so magnificent that the Laughing Prince's throne-room seemed plain as a farmhouse by comparison. The tiles over which Firefox dragged Meggie to his master were strewn with white rose-petals. A sea of candles burned in claw-footed candelabra, standing between columns covered with silver scales. The light of the candles made them shimmer like snakeskin. Countless servants hurried around between the scaly pillars, soundlessly, heads bent. Maidservants waited in respectful rows for a sign from their master. They all looked tired, torn from sleep, just as Fenoglio had described it. Some were leaning their backs surreptitiously against the tapestries on the walls.

Beside the Adderhead, at a table that seemed to be laid for a hundred guests, sat a woman as pale as a porcelain doll, with

such a childlike face that Meggie would have thought her the Adderhead's daughter if she didn't know better. The Silver Prince himself ate greedily, as if by swallowing the food that stood in countless dishes on the table covered with black cloth, he could swallow his own fear too. But his wife touched nothing. It seemed to Meggie that the sight of her husband eating so greedily nauseated her; she kept passing her ringed hands over her swollen belly. Oddly enough, her pregnancy made her look even more like a child: a child with a thin, bitter mouth and cool eyes.

The silver-nosed Piper stood behind the Adderhead, one foot on a stool, his lute supported on his thigh, singing softly as his fingers slowly plucked the strings. But Meggie's eyes did not linger on him long. At the end of the table she had seen someone she knew only too well. Her heart faltered like an old woman's feet when Mortola returned her glance, with a smile so full of triumph that Meggie's knees began to tremble. The man who had wounded Dustfinger in the mill sat beside Mortola. His hands were bandaged, and above his forehead the fire had burned a pathway into his hair. Basta was in an even worse state. He was sitting close to Mortola, his face so red and swollen that Meggie almost failed to recognize him. But he had escaped death once again. Perhaps the good-luck charms he always wore worked after all.

Firefox clutched Meggie's arm tightly as he walked towards the Adderhead in his heavy fox-fur cloak – as if to prove that he personally had caught this little bird. He roughly pushed her in front of the table and threw the framed photograph down among the dishes.

The Adderhead raised his head and looked at her, with bloodshot eyes in which Meggie could still see the traces of the bad night Fenoglio's words had given him. When he raised his greasy hand, the Piper fell silent behind him and propped his lute against the wall.

‘There she is!’ announced Firefox, as his master wiped the grease from his fingers and lips with an embroidered napkin. ‘I wish we had a witch-picture like this of everyone we’re after. Then the informers wouldn’t keep bringing us the wrong people.’

The Adderhead had picked up the photograph. Appraisingly, he compared it with Meggie. She tried to bend her head, but Firefox forced her face up.

‘Remarkable!’ commented the Adderhead. ‘My best painters couldn’t have produced anywhere near as good a likeness of the girl.’ With a bored expression, he reached for a little silver toothpick and prodded his teeth with it. ‘Mortola says you’re a witch. Is it true?’

‘Yes!’ replied Meggie, looking him straight in the eye. Now they’d find out whether Fenoglio’s words would come true again. If only she had been able to read to the end! She had read a great deal of it, but she could feel the rest of the words still waiting under her dress. Forget them, Meggie, she told herself. You must make the words you *have* already read come true – and hope that the Adderhead plays his part just as you do.

‘Yes?’ repeated the Adderhead. ‘So you admit it? Don’t you know what I usually do to witches and magicians? I burn them.’ The same words. He was speaking Fenoglio’s words. Exactly as Fenoglio had put them into his mouth. Exactly as she had read them out loud in the infirmary a few hours ago.

She knew what she must answer. The words came into her mind of their own accord, as if they were hers and not Fenoglio’s. Meggie looked at Basta and the other man from the mill. Fenoglio hadn’t written about them personally, but the answer was still right. ‘The last to burn,’ she said calmly, ‘were your own men. Only one man commands fire in this world, and he’s not you.’

The Adderhead stared at her – watchful as a fat tom-cat not yet certain how to play his game most satisfactorily with the mouse he has caught. ‘Ah,’ he said in his heavy, thick voice. ‘I suppose you mean that fire-dancer. He likes to go around with poachers and footpads. You think he’ll come and try to rescue you, eh? Then, at last, I could feed him to the fire that you claim obeys him so well.’

‘I don’t need anyone to rescue me,’ replied Meggie. ‘I would have come to you myself in any case, even if you hadn’t had me brought here.’

There was laughter among the silver columns. The Adderhead leaned across the table and examined her with unconcealed curiosity.

‘Well, well!’ he said. ‘Really? Why? To plead with me to let your father go? Because that robber is your father, isn’t he? At least, Mortola says so. She even says we’ve caught your mother too.’

Mortola! Fenoglio had never thought of her. He hadn’t written a word about her, but there she sat with her magpie gaze. Don’t think about it, Meggie. Be cold. Cold to your very heart, as you were on the night when you summoned the Shadow. But where was she to get the right words from now? Improvise, Meggie, she told herself, like an actress who’s forgotten her lines. Go on! Make up your own words and then just mix them into the words Fenoglio wrote for you, like an extra spice.

‘The Magpie is right,’ she replied to the Adderhead. And sure enough, her voice sounded calm and steady, as if her heart wasn’t thudding in her breast like a small, hunted animal. ‘You took my father captive when she’d almost killed him, and you’re holding my mother prisoner in your dungeons. However, I’m not here to ask for leniency. I have a deal to offer you.’

‘Listen to the little witch!’ Basta’s voice shook with hatred. ‘Why don’t I just slice her up nice and thin, and you can feed

her to your dogs?’

However, the Adderhead ignored him. He kept his eyes fixed on Meggie’s face, as if seeking it for what she *wasn’t* saying. Be like Dustfinger, she told herself. You can never tell what Dustfinger is thinking or feeling from the way he looks. Try! It can’t be all that difficult.

‘A deal?’ The Adderhead took his wife’s hand, as casually as if he had just found it lying beside his plate by chance. ‘What do you plan to sell me that I can’t simply take for myself?’

His men laughed. Meggie tried not to notice that her fingers were numb with terror. Once again it was Fenoglio’s words that passed her lips. Words that she had read aloud.

‘My father,’ she continued, in a carefully controlled voice, ‘is no robber. He’s a bookbinder and an enchanter. He is the only man alive who doesn’t fear death. Haven’t you seen his wound? Didn’t the physicians tell you that injury ought to have killed him? *Nothing* can kill him. Mortola tried, and did he die? No. He has brought Cosimo the Fair back to life, although the White Women had already delivered him up to Death, and if you let him and my mother go then you need not fear Death either, for my father,’ said Meggie, taking her time over the last few words, ‘my father can make you immortal.’

All was very quiet in the great hall.

Until Mortola’s voice broke the silence. ‘She’s lying!’ she cried. ‘The little witch is lying! Don’t believe a word of it. It’s her tongue, her bewitched tongue. That’s her only weapon. Her father can die all right, indeed he can! Bring him here and I’ll prove it. I’ll kill him myself before your eyes, and this time I’ll do it properly!’

No! Meggie’s heart began to race as if it would leap out of her breast. What had she done? The Adderhead was staring at her, but when at last he spoke it seemed as if he hadn’t even heard what Mortola had said.

‘How?’ was all he asked. ‘How could your father do what you promise?’ He was thinking of the night to come now. Meggie saw it in his eyes. He was thinking of the fear waiting for him: it would be even worse than in the night just gone, even more merciless ...

Meggie leaned forward over the laden table. She spoke the words as if she were reading them aloud again. ‘My father will bind you a book!’ she said, so quietly that apart from the Adderhead no one, except perhaps his doll-like wife, could hear her. ‘He will bind it for you with my help, a book with five hundred blank pages. He will cover it with wood and leather, he will give it brass clasps, and you will write your name on the first page in your own hand. In token of thanks, however, you will let him go, and with him all whose lives he asks for, and you will hide the book in a place known only to you, for hear this: as long as that book exists you will be immortal. Nothing will be able to kill you, no disease, no weapon – as long as the book remains intact.’

‘Indeed!’ The Adderhead’s bloodshot eyes were staring at her. His breath smelled sweetish, as if he had been drinking wine that was too heavy. ‘And suppose someone burns it or tears it up? Parchment doesn’t last like silver.’

‘You will have to take good care of it,’ replied Meggie quietly – and it will kill you all the same, she added in her thoughts. She felt as if she were hearing her own voice reading Fenoglio’s words again (and how good they had tasted!): *But there was that one thing the girl did not tell the Adderhead: the book not only made him immortal but could kill him too, if someone only wrote three words on its white pages, and those words were: heart, spell, death.*

‘What’s she whispering?’ Mortola had risen to her feet. She leaned her bony hands on the table. ‘Don’t listen to her!’ she told the Adderhead. ‘She’s a witch and a liar! How often do I have to tell you? Kill her – her and her father – before they kill

you! The old man probably wrote all her words for her, the old man I told you about!’

For the first time the Adderhead turned to look at Mortola, and Meggie briefly feared that he might believe her after all. But then she saw the anger in his face. ‘Be quiet!’ he snapped at the Magpie. ‘Capricorn may have listened to you, but he’s gone, like the Shadow who made him powerful, and you are tolerated at this court only because you have rendered me certain services! But I don’t want to hear any more of your drivel about silver tongues and old men who can bring written words to life. Not another word out of you, or I send you back to where you once came from – in the kitchen with the maids.’

Mortola turned as white as if she had no blood left in her veins.

‘I warned you!’ she said hoarsely. ‘Don’t forget it!’ Then, stony-faced, she sat down again. Basta cast her an anxious glance, but Mortola took no notice of him. She just stared at Meggie with such venom that she felt those eyes were burning a hole in her face.

The Adderhead, however, speared one of the tiny roasted birds lying on a silver platter in front of him with his knife, and put it between his lips with relish. Obviously his angry exchange with Mortola had given him an appetite. ‘Did I understand you correctly? You yourself would help your father with the work?’ he asked, as he spat out the little bones into the hand of a servant who hastily stepped forward. ‘Does that mean he has taught a daughter his craft, as a master craftsman usually teaches his sons? Surely you know that such a thing is forbidden in my realm?’

Meggie looked at him fearlessly. Even these words had been written by Fenoglio, every one of them, and she knew what the Adderhead was going to say next, because she had read that too.

‘If a craftsman of Argenta breaks that law, my pretty child,’ he went on, ‘I usually have his right hand chopped off. But, very well, I’ll make an exception in your case, since it’s to my own advantage.’

He’s going to do it, thought Meggie. He’s going to let me see Mo just as Fenoglio planned. Happiness emboldened her. ‘My mother,’ she said, although Fenoglio had not written anything about that, ‘she could help too. Then it would be done even faster.’

‘No, no!’ The Adderhead smiled with delight, as if the disappointment in Meggie’s eyes tasted better than all the delicacies on silver dishes before him. ‘Your mother stays in her dungeon, as a little incentive to the two of you to work quickly.’ He signalled impatiently to Firefox. ‘What are you waiting for? Take her to her father! And tell the librarian to set to work this very night, to provide everything a bookbinder needs for his work.’

‘Take her to her father?’ Firefox gripped Meggie’s arm, but he did not take a step. ‘You surely don’t believe her witchy nonsense?’

Meggie almost forgot to breathe. She had not read these words aloud; not one of them was written by Fenoglio. What would happen now? Not a foot moved in the hall – even the servants stood still exactly where they were – you could feel the silence. But Firefox went on. ‘A book to hold Death captive in its pages? Only a child would believe such a story, and this child has thought it up to save her father. Mortola’s right. Hang him now, before we become the laughing stock of the peasants! Capricorn would have done it long ago.’

‘Capricorn?’ The Adderhead spat out the name like one of the delicate bones he had spat into the servant’s hand. He did not look at Firefox as he spoke, but his thick fingers clenched into a fist on the table. ‘Since Mortola came back I’ve heard that name very often. But as far as I know Capricorn is dead – even his

personal witch and poisoner couldn't prevent that – and you, Firefox, have obviously forgotten who your new master is. I am the Adderhead! My family has ruled this land for more than seven generations, while your old master was only the bastard son of a soot-blackened smith! You were a fire-raiser, a murderer, no more, and I've made you my herald. A little more gratitude is called for, I think, or do you want to look for a new master?'

Firefox's face turned almost as red as his hair. 'No, Your Grace,' he said almost inaudibly. 'No, I don't.'

'Good!' The Adderhead impaled another bird on his knife. They were waiting in their silver dish, piled up like chestnuts. 'Then do as I said. Take the girl to her father, and make sure he soon sets to work. Have you brought that physician, as I ordered? The Barn Owl?'

Firefox nodded, without looking at his master.

'Good. Let him visit her father to tend him twice a day. We want our prisoner to be fit and well, understand?'

'I understand,' said Firefox hoarsely.

He looked neither to right nor left as he led Meggie out of the hall. All eyes followed her – and avoided her own eyes when they met theirs. Witch. That was what they had called her before, back in Capricorn's village. Perhaps it was true. At that moment she felt powerful, as powerful as if the whole Inkworld obeyed her voice. They are taking me to Mo, she thought. They are taking me to him, and that will be the beginning of the end for the Adderhead.

But when the servants had closed the doors of the hall behind them, a soldier barred Firefox's way.

'Mortola has a message for you,' he said. 'You're to search the girl for a sheet of paper or anything else with writing on it. She says you should look in her sleeves first. She hid something there once before.'

Before Meggie fully realized what was happening, Firefox took hold of her and roughly pushed her sleeves up. Finding nothing there, he was about to put his hands inside her dress, but Meggie pushed them away and took out the parchment herself. Firefox tore it from her fingers, stared at the written letters for a moment with the baffled look of a man who couldn't read, and then, without a word, handed the parchment to the soldier.

Meggie felt dizzy with fear as he led her on. Suppose Mortola showed the letter to the Adderhead? Suppose, suppose ...?

'Get moving!' growled Firefox, pushing her up a flight of stairs. As if numbed, Meggie stumbled up the steep steps. Fenoglio, she thought, Fenoglio, help me. Mortola knows about our plan.

'Stop!' Firefox brutally grabbed her by the hair. Four men-at-arms were on guard outside a door with three bolts over it. A nod of the head from Firefox told them to open it.

Mo, thought Meggie. They really are taking me to him. And that thought extinguished any others. Even thoughts of Mortola.



Fire on the Wall

Lo, on the whiteness of the wall,
Behold, appeared a human hand,
Which wrote and wrote, in letters tall,
A fiery message for the land.

Heinrich Heine,
Belshazzar

All was quiet in the wide, dark corridors as Dustfinger and Farid stole into the Castle of Night. Only wax dripped from a thousand candles on the stone flags that all bore the Adderhead's coat of arms. Servants hurried past them in soft-soled shoes, and maids scuttled by with bent heads. Guards stood in endless passages and outside doorways so high that they seemed to have been made for giants, not ordinary humans. Every one of them bore the emblematic creature of the Adderhead – the snake striking at its prey – in scales of silver, and huge mirrors hung beside the doors. Farid kept stopping in front of them to look into the polished metal and reassure himself that he really was invisible.

Dustfinger made an acorn-sized flame dance on his hand so that the boy could follow him. Servants were carrying delicious things to eat out of one of the halls they passed. Their aroma reminded Dustfinger painfully of his invisible stomach, and

when he pushed his way past the servants as soundlessly as the Adderhead's snake, he heard them talking in muted tones about a young witch, and a deal that was to save the Bluejay from the gallows. Dustfinger, as invisible as their voices, listened to them and did not know which of his emotions was the stronger: relief that Fenoglio's words were obviously coming true again, or fear of those words and the invisible threads spun by the old man, threads to catch even the Adderhead and make him dream of immortality, although Fenoglio had recorded his death in writing long ago. But had Meggie really read those deadly words before they took her away?

'Now what?' Farid whispered. 'Did you hear that? They've shut Meggie up with Silvertongue in one of the towers! How do I get there?' His voice was shaking – heavens, what a plague love was! Anyone who claimed otherwise had never yet felt that wretched trembling of the heart.

'Forget it!' Dustfinger whispered to the boy. 'The dungeons in the tower have strong doors. Even invisible you wouldn't get through them. And the place will be swarming with guards. After all, they still think they've caught the Bluejay. You'd do better to steal into the kitchen and listen to the maids and the menservants – you always learn something interesting that way. But be careful! I repeat: invisible doesn't mean immortal.'

'How about you?'

'I'm going to venture down to the dungeons under the castle, where the less valuable prisoners are held, to find the Barn Owl and Meggie's mother. See that fat marble statue there? Must be some ancestor of the Adderhead. We'll meet there. And don't even think of following me! Farid?'

But the boy had already gone. Dustfinger suppressed a soft curse. He just hoped no one heard the boy's lovesick heart thudding!

It was a long, dark way to the dungeons. One of the women healers who worked for the Barn Owl had told him where the

entrance lay. None of the guards he passed even turned their heads as Dustfinger slipped by them. Two were lounging around at the mouth of the damp corridor, lit only by a single torch, with the door to the dungeons at the end of it. Beyond that door the way went on down, down into the deadly entrails of the Castle of Night which digested human beings like a stony stomach, now and then excreting a few dead bodies. There was another snake on the door that no one ever wished to enter, but here the silver adder was coiled around a skull.

The guards were quarrelling – it was something to do with Firefox – but Dustfinger had no time to eavesdrop. He was only glad that all their attention was on each other as he slipped past. The door creaked slightly when he opened it, just wide enough to get through – his heart almost stopped as he did it – but the guards didn't turn round. What wouldn't he give for a fearless heart like Farid's, even if it made you reckless! It was so dark beyond the door that, for a moment, he had to summon fire before his invisible feet made their way down the steps, and just in time. They were steep and well-trodden, worn away by the people whom the dungeons had swallowed up. Fear and desperation rose to greet him like vapours from the depths. The steps were said to lead as far down under the hill as the castle towers rose to the sky above it, but Dustfinger had never met anyone who could confirm this tale. Of those he had known who were taken down here, he had never seen a single one alive again.

Dustfinger, Dustfinger, he thought before starting on the downward climb, this is a dangerous path to take just to pass the time of day with two old friends, and your visit won't even do them much good. However, he had run after the Barn Owl for years just as Farid was now running after him, and as for Resa – perhaps he recalled her name last to convince himself that he was certainly not climbing down this damned stairway on her account.

Unfortunately even invisible feet make sounds, but luckily he only met guards once. Three warders passed him at such close quarters that he could smell the garlic on their breath, and he only just managed to press close to the wall in time to stop the fattest of them bumping into him. During the rest of the dark downward climb, he met no one. There was a torch burning every few metres along the rough-hewn walls, so different from the finely chiselled masonry in the castle above. Dustfinger twice passed a room where more guards were sitting, but they never even raised their heads as he stole by, more quietly than a breath of air and equally invisible.

When the stairs finally came to an end, he almost collided with a warder pacing up and down a candlelit corridor with a bored expression on his face. Soundlessly, he slipped past the man. He peered into dungeons scarcely larger than holes, too low for anyone to stand up in. Others were large enough to take fifty men. It would certainly be easy simply to forget a prisoner down here, and Dustfinger's heart contracted as he imagined how Resa must be feeling in this darkness. She had been a prisoner before, for so many years, and after that her freedom had lasted barely a year.

He heard voices, and followed them along another corridor until they grew louder. A small, bald-headed man came towards him. He passed so close that Dustfinger held his breath – but the man didn't notice him, just muttered something about stupid women and disappeared round the corner. Dustfinger pressed his back against the damp wall and listened. Someone was weeping – a woman, and someone else was speaking soothingly to her. There was only one cell at the end of the corridor: a dark, barred cavern with a torch burning beside it. How was he to get past those damned bars? He went close to them. There sat Resa, stroking another woman's hair to comfort her, while Twofingers sat beside them playing a sad tune on a little flute. No one could have done it half as well with all ten fingers as he did with seven. Dustfinger didn't know the others:

neither the women with Resa nor the other men. There was no sign of the Barn Owl. Where had they taken him? Had he perhaps been imprisoned with Silvertongue?

He looked around, listened. Somewhere a man laughed, probably one of the warders. Dustfinger held a finger in the burning torch, whispered fire-words until a flame leaped from his fingertip like a sparrow picking up crumbs. When he had first shown Farid how to write his name on a wall in fire, the boy's black eyes had almost popped out of his head. Yet it was perfectly easy. Dustfinger put his hand between the bars and passed his finger over the rough stone. *Resa*, he wrote, and saw Twofingers lower his flute and stare at the burning letters. Resa turned. Heavens, how sad she looked! He should have come sooner. A good thing her daughter couldn't see her like this.

She rose, took a step towards her name, and hesitated. Still with his finger, Dustfinger drew a fiery line like an arrow pointing his way. She came close to the bars and stared at the empty air, incredulous and baffled.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered. 'You won't see my face today, but it's still as scarred as ever.'

'Dustfinger?' She reached into the air, and his invisible fingers took her hand. She was actually speaking! The Black Prince had told him she could speak again, but he hadn't believed him.

'What a beautiful voice!' he whispered. 'I always imagined it would be something like that. When did you get it back?'

'When Mortola shot Mo.'

Twofingers was still staring at her. The woman Resa had been comforting turned to them too. Just so long as they didn't say anything ...

'How are you?' she whispered. 'How is Meggie?'

'Well. Better off than you, for sure. She and the writer got together to change this story for the better.'

Resa was clinging to the bars with one hand, and to his own hand with the other. 'Where is she now?'

'Probably with her father.' He saw the horror in her face. 'Yes, I know, he's up in the tower, but that's what she wanted. It's all part of the plan Fenoglio has thought up.'

'How is he? How's Mo?'

Jealousy still gave him a pang. The heart was a stupid thing. 'Said to be better, and thanks to Meggie he's not going to be hanged for the time being, so don't look so sad. Your daughter and Fenoglio have thought of a very clever way to save him. Him, and you, and all the others ...' Steps approached. Dustfinger let go of Resa's hand and moved back, but the footsteps went past and away again.

'Are you still there?' Her eyes searched the darkness.

'Yes.' He took hold of her fingers once more. 'We only ever seem to meet in dungeons now! How long does it take your husband to bind a book?'

'Bind a book?'

He heard footsteps again, but this time the sound died away more quickly.

'Yes. It's a crazy story, but since Fenoglio has written it and your daughter has read it, no doubt it will come true.'

She put her other hand through the bars until her fingers met his face. 'You really are invisible! How do you do it?' She sounded as curious as a little girl. She was curious about everything she didn't know. He had always liked that in her.

'Only an old fairy trick!' Her fingers stroked his scarred cheek. Why can't you help her, Dustfinger? he thought. She'll go mad down here! Suppose he struck one of the warders down? But there was still that endless staircase to climb, and after it the castle, the wide courtyard, the bare hilltop – nowhere to hide her, no tree to conceal her. Only stones and soldiers.

‘What about your wife?’ Her voice was beautiful. ‘Did you find her?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘About what?’

‘The time you were away.’

‘Nothing.’

‘I’ve told Mo everything.’

Yes, no doubt she had. ‘Well, Silvertongue knows what you’re talking about, but I don’t think Roxane would have believed me, do you?’

‘No, probably not.’ For a moment she bent her head as if she were remembering – remembering the time he couldn’t tell Roxane about. ‘The Black Prince told me you have a daughter too,’ she whispered. ‘Why didn’t you ever tell me about her?’

Twofingers and the woman with the tear-stained face were still staring at them. With luck they believed by now that they had imagined the fiery letters. There was only a faint trace of soot left on the wall, and it was not unusual, after all, for people to begin talking to the empty air in dungeons.

‘I had two daughters.’ Dustfinger jumped as someone screamed somewhere. ‘The elder is around Meggie’s age, but she’s angry with me. She wants to know where I was for those ten years. Perhaps you know a pretty story I can tell her?’

‘What about the other one?’

‘She’s dead.’

Resa just pressed his hand. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Yes. So am I.’ He turned. One of the warders was standing at the end of the corridor. He called something to another warder, and then walked on, looking sullen.

‘Three weeks, maybe four!’ Resa whispered. ‘That’s how long Mo would need, depending on the thickness of the book.’

‘Good, then that’s not so bad.’ He put his hand through the bars and stroked her hair. ‘A couple of weeks are nothing to all those years in Capricorn’s house, Resa! Remember that every time you feel like beating your head against these bars. Promise me.’

She nodded. ‘Tell Meggie I’m well!’ she whispered. ‘And tell Mo too, please. You’ll be talking to him as well, won’t you?’

‘Yes, of course!’ lied Dustfinger. What harm did it do to promise her that? For what else could he do to help her? The other woman began sobbing again. Her weeping echoed back from the mouldering walls, louder and louder.

‘Damn it all, shut your gob there!’

Dustfinger pressed close to the wall as the warder approached. He was a fat fellow, a hulk of a man, and Dustfinger held his breath as he stopped right beside him. For a terrible moment Twofingers was staring straight at him as if he could see him, but then his eyes moved on, searching the darkness, perhaps for more fiery letters on the wall.

‘Don’t cry!’ Resa tried to calm the woman as the warder struck the bars with his stick. Dustfinger could hardly find a corner to retreat into. The weeping woman buried her face in Resa’s skirt, and the warder turned with a grunt and trudged away again. Dustfinger waited until the sound of his footsteps had died away before returning to the bars. Resa was kneeling beside the woman, whose face was still buried in her dress, and talking to her softly.

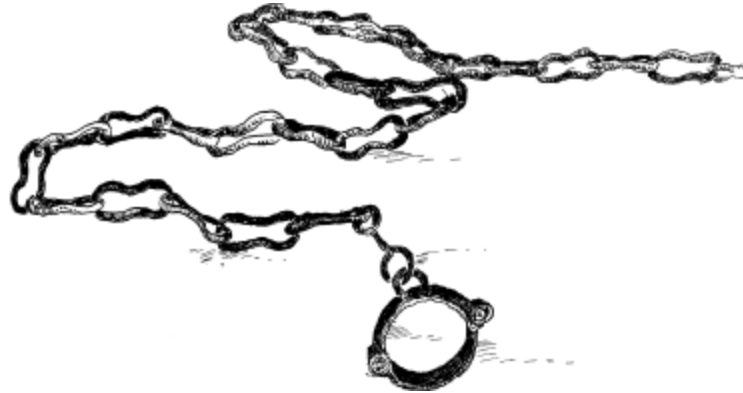
‘Resa!’ he whispered. ‘I must go. Did they bring an old man down here tonight? A physician, he calls himself the Barn Owl.’

She came back to the bars. ‘No,’ she whispered, ‘but the warders were talking about a physician they’ve arrested. He has to treat all the sick people in the castle before they shut him up with us.’

‘That’ll be him. Give him my greetings.’ It was hard for him to leave her alone in the dark like this. He would have liked to

free her from her cage, just as he set fairies free in market places, but Resa wouldn't be able to fly away.

At the foot of the stairs, two warders were joking about the hangman whose work Firefox was only too keen to take over. Dustfinger slipped past them, quick as a lizard, but all the same one of them turned his way with a confused expression. Perhaps the smell of fire that Dustfinger wore like a second coat had risen to his nostrils.



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In the Tower of the Castle of Night

You never came out the way you came in.

**Francis Spufford,
*The Child that Books Built***

Mo was asleep when they brought Meggie to him. It was only the fever that made him sleep, numbing the thoughts that kept him awake hour after hour, day after day, while he listened to his own heartbeat in the draughty cell where they had put him, high in one of the silver towers. The moon was still shining through the barred windows when the approaching footsteps roused him.

‘Wake up, Bluejay!’ The light of a torch fell into the cell, and Firefox pushed a slender figure through the door.

Resa? What kind of dream was this? A good one, for a change?

But it was not his wife they had brought. It was his daughter.

With difficulty, Mo sat up. He tasted Meggie’s tears on his face as she hugged him so hard that he drew in his breath sharply with pain.

Meggie. They had caught her too.

‘Mo? Say something!’ She took his hand and looked at his face with concern. ‘How are you?’ she whispered.

‘Well, fancy that!’ mocked Firefox. ‘The Bluejay really does have a daughter. I expect she’s about to tell you she’s here of her own free will, as she tried to make the Adderhead believe. She’s done a deal with him, and it’s supposed to save your neck. You should have heard the fairy-tales she told. You could always sell her and her angel’s tongue to the strolling players.’

Mo didn’t even ask what he was talking about. He drew Meggie close as soon as the guard had bolted the door behind Firefox, kissed her hair, her forehead, took her face between his hands. He had been so sure that he’d seen that face for the last time in the stable in the forest. ‘Meggie, for God’s sake,’ he said, leaning his back against the cold wall, since he could still hardly stand. He was so glad to see her there. So glad and so dismayed too. ‘How did they catch you?’

‘Never mind that. Everything will be all right, believe me!’ She put her hand on his shirt where there was still dried blood on it. ‘You looked so sick in the stable ... I thought I’d never see you again.’

‘I thought the same when I found that letter on your pillow.’ He stroked the tears off her lashes as he had so often done before over the years. How tall she was, hardly a child any more, although he could still clearly see the child in her. ‘Oh, heavens, it’s so good to see you, Meggie. I know I shouldn’t say so. A good father would say: dear daughter, do you have to get yourself locked up every time I do?’

She had to laugh, but he saw the concern in her eyes. She passed her fingers over his face as if she were finding shadows that hadn’t been there before. Perhaps the White Women had left their fingerprints behind, even though they hadn’t taken him away with them.

‘Don’t look at me like that! I’m better, much better, and you know why.’ He brushed the hair back from her forehead; it was

so like her mother's. The thought of Resa hurt like a sharp thorn. 'Those were powerful words. Did Fenoglio write them for you?'

Meggie nodded. 'And he wrote more for me too,' she whispered in his ear. 'Words that will save you. You and Resa and all the others.'

Words. His whole life seemed to be woven from words. His life, and his death too.

'They took your mother and the others to the dungeons under the castle.' He remembered Fenoglio's description only too well: *the dungeons under the Castle of Night where fear clung to the walls like mould, and no ray of sun ever warmed the black stones*. What words were going to get Resa out of there? And him out of this silver tower?

'Mo?' Meggie put her hand on his shoulder. 'Do you think you can work?'

'Work? Why?' He couldn't help smiling, for the first time in a long, long while. 'Do you think the Adderhead will forget he wants to hang me if I restore his books for him?'

But he didn't once interrupt as she told him, in a low voice, Fenoglio's idea for rescuing him. He sat on the straw mattress where he had lain these last few days and nights, counting the notches carved in the walls by other unfortunates, and listened to Meggie. And the more of the story she told, the crazier Fenoglio's plan seemed, but when she had finished Mo shook his head, and smiled.

'Not a bad idea!' he said quietly. 'No, the old fox is no fool, he knows his story.' It's just a pity that Mortola presumably knows the altered version now too, he added to himself. And that you were interrupted before you had read it to the end. As so often, Meggie seemed to see what he was thinking from his face. He saw it in her eyes. He stroked the bridge of her nose with his forefinger, as he always used to when she was little, so

little that her hand could hardly close round his finger. Little Meggie, big Meggie, brave Meggie ...

‘You’re so much braver than I am,’ he said. ‘Bargaining with the Adderhead. I’d really have liked to see that.’

She put her arms round his neck and stroked his tired face. ‘You will see it, Mo!’ she whispered. ‘Fenoglio’s words always come true, much more so in this world than in our own. They made you well again, didn’t they?’

He just nodded. If he had said anything, she would have known from his voice that he found it difficult to believe, as she did, in a happy ending. Even when Meggie was younger she had always known at once if he was troubled in some way, but then it had been easy to take her mind off it with a joke, a pun, a story. It wasn’t so simple now. No one could see into Mo’s heart as easily as Meggie, except her mother. Resa had the same way of looking at him.

‘I expect you’ve heard why they dragged me here, haven’t you?’ he asked. ‘I’m supposed to be a famous robber. Remember when we used to play Robin Hood?’

Meggie nodded. ‘You always wanted to be Robin.’

‘And you wanted to be the Sheriff of Nottingham. The baddies are stronger, Mo, you kept telling me. Clever child. Do you know what they call me? You’ll like it.’

‘The Bluejay.’ Meggie almost whispered the name.

‘Yes, exactly. What do you think? I don’t suppose there’s much hope the real Bluejay will come wanting his name back before my execution, do you?’

How gravely she was looking at him. As if she knew something he didn’t.

‘There isn’t any other Bluejay, Mo,’ she said quietly. ‘You *are* him.’ Without another word she took his arm, turned his sleeve up and let her finger trace the scar that Basta’s dogs had left. ‘That wound was just healing when we were in Fenoglio’s

house. He gave you an ointment to help the scar tissue form better, remember?’

He didn’t understand. Not a word. ‘So?’

‘You are the Bluejay!’ She repeated it. ‘No one else. Fenoglio wrote the songs about him. He made him up because he thought his world needed a robber – and he used you as his model! *He was a noble robber in my imagination*, that’s what he wrote to me.’

It was some time before Mo’s mind could take in the meaning of her words. Suddenly he had to laugh. So loudly that the guard opened the barred flap in the door and stared suspiciously in. Mo wiped the laugh off his face and stared back until the guard disappeared again, cursing. Then he leaned his head against the wall behind him and closed his eyes.

‘I’m sorry, Mo,’ whispered Meggie. ‘So sorry. Sometimes Fenoglio is a terrible old man!’

‘Well, yes.’

Perhaps that was why Orpheus had found it so easy to read him here. Because he was already in this story anyway. ‘What do you think?’ he asked. ‘Do I feel honoured, or do I wring Fenoglio’s old neck?’

Meggie put her hand on his forehead. ‘You’re all hot! Lie down. You must rest.’

How often had he said the same to her, how many nights had he spent sitting beside her bed? Measles, chickenpox, scarlet fever ... ‘Lord, Meggie,’ he had groaned when she caught whooping cough too, ‘can’t you leave out at least one childhood illness?’

The fever was pouring hot lead into his veins, and when Meggie bent over him, he thought for a moment that Resa was sitting beside him. But Meggie’s hair was fairer.

‘Where are Dustfinger and Farid? They were with you, weren’t they? Have they been captured too?’ The fever made

his tongue heavy.

‘No, I don’t think so. Did you know Dustfinger has a wife?’

‘Yes, it was because of her that Basta cut his face. Have you met her?’

Meggie nodded. ‘She’s very beautiful. Farid is jealous of her.’

‘Really? I thought he was in love with you.’

She went red, bright red.

‘Meggie?’ Mo sat up. When on earth was this fever finally going to go away? It made him as weak as an old man. ‘Oh no!’ he said quietly. ‘I see I’ve missed something. My daughter falls in love and I fail to notice! One more reason to curse that damned book. You should have stayed with Farid. I’d have been all right.’

‘You wouldn’t! They’d have hanged you!’

‘They may yet. The boy must be worried out of his mind about you now. Poor fellow. Has he kissed you?’

‘Mo!’ She turned her face away, embarrassed, but she was smiling.

‘I have to know. I think I even have to give my permission, don’t I?’

‘Mo, stop it!’ She nudged him in the ribs with her elbow, as usual when he was teasing her, and was horrified to see his face twist with pain. ‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she whispered.

‘Well, so long as it hurts, I’m still alive.’

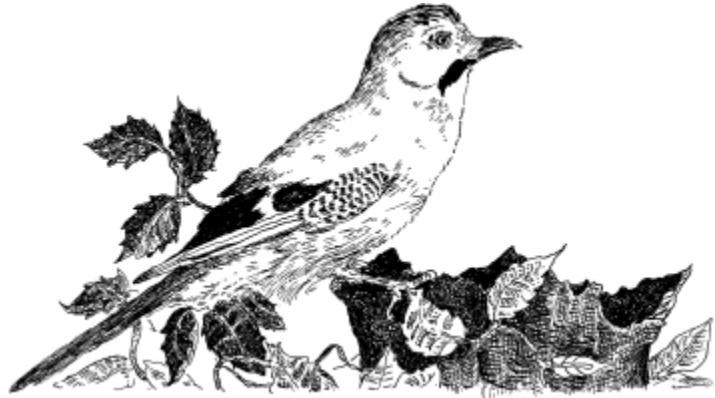
The wind carried the sound of horses’ hooves up to them. Weapons clashed, voices rang through the night.

‘I tell you what,’ said Mo quietly. ‘Let’s play our old game. We’ll imagine we’re in another story. In Hobbiton, maybe, that’s quite a peaceful place, or with Wart and the wild geese. What do you think?’

She did not reply for some time. Then she took his hand and whispered, ‘I’d like to imagine us in the Wayless Wood

together. You and me and Resa. Then I could show you the fairies, and the fire-elves and the whispering trees, and – no, wait! Balbulus’s workshop! That’s it. I’d like to be there with you. He’s an illuminator, Mo. In the Castle of Sighs in Ombra! The best of all illuminators. You could see his brushes and pigments ...’

Suddenly she sounded so excited! She could still forget everything, like a child – she could forget the bolted door and the gallows in the courtyard. The mere thought of a couple of fine paintbrushes would do it. ‘Very well,’ said Mo, stroking her fair hair again. ‘Anything you say. Let’s imagine we’re in the castle of Ombra. I really would like to see those brushes.’



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Where to?

I dreamed a limitless book,
A book unbound,
Its leaves scattered in fantastic abundance
On every line there was a new horizon drawn,
New heavens supposed;
New states, new souls.

Clive Barker,
Abarat, Preface

Farid was waiting by the statue, as they had agreed. He had hidden behind it – obviously he still found it hard to believe that he was invisible – and he hadn't managed to get a sight of Meggie. Dustfinger could tell from his voice; it was husky with disappointment. 'I got into the tower, I even saw the cell, but it's just too well guarded. And in the kitchen they were saying she's a witch and she'll be killed along with her father!'

'Well, what did you expect they'd be talking about? Did you hear anything else?'

'Yes, something about Firefox. They said he'll send Cosimo back to the dead.'

'Ah. Nothing about the Black Prince?'

'Only that there are people looking for him, but they haven't found him. They say he and his bear can exchange shapes, so

that sometimes the bear is the Prince and the Prince is the bear. And they say he can fly and make himself invisible, and that he's going to rescue the Bluejay!'

'Really?' Dustfinger laughed quietly. 'The Prince will like that. Right, come on. It's time for us to be off.'

'Be off?' Dustfinger felt Farid's fingers clutching his arm. 'Why? We could hide. The castle's so big, no one would find us.'

'You think so? What would you do here anyway? Meggie wouldn't go with you even if you could magic her through locked doors. Have you forgotten the deal she was offering the Adderhead? Resa says it will take Silvertongue a few weeks to bind a book, and the Adderhead won't hurt a hair of his head or Meggie's until he has that book, will he? So come on! It's time we looked for the Prince. We must tell him about Sootbird.'

Outside, it was still as dark as if morning would never come. This time they slipped through the castle gate together with a troop of men-at-arms. Dustfinger would have liked to know where they were going so late at night. Let's hope they're not hunting the Prince, he thought, cursing Sootbird for his treacherous heart.

The men-at-arms galloped off down the road leading away from Mount Adder into the mountains. Dustfinger was standing there watching them go when something furry suddenly jumped up at him. Taken by surprise, he stumbled into the structure of one of the gallows. Two feet were swinging back and forth above him. But Gwin clung to his arm as naturally as if his master had always been invisible.

'Damn it all!' His heart was in his mouth as he seized the marten. 'You'll be the death of me yet, you little beast, won't you?' he hissed at him. 'Where did you spring from?'

As if in answer, Roxane stepped out of the shadow of the castle walls. 'Dustfinger?' she whispered as her eyes searched for his invisible face. Jink appeared behind her and raised his nose, sniffing.

‘Yes, who did you think?’ He guided her on with him, pressing her close to the wall so that the sentries on the battlements couldn’t see her. This time he didn’t ask why she had followed them. He was too glad that she was there. Even if the expression on her face reminded him for a moment of Resa and her sadness. ‘There’s nothing we can do here for the moment,’ he whispered. ‘But did you know that Sootbird is a welcome guest in the Castle of Night?’

‘Sootbird?’

‘Yes. It’s bad news. You ride back to Ombra and see to Jehan and Brianna. I’ll go and look for the Black Prince and warn him of this cuckoo in the nest.’

‘And how are you going to find him?’ Roxane smiled, as if she could see his baffled face. ‘Shall I take you to him?’

‘You?’

‘Yes.’ Up above, the guards called something to each other. Dustfinger drew Roxane even closer to the wall. ‘The Prince cares for his Motley Folk very well,’ she whispered. ‘And as I’m sure you can imagine, he doesn’t always earn the money he needs for cripples and old folk, widows and orphans, by doing tricks in market places. His men are skilful poachers and the terror of tax gatherers, they have hiding places all over the forest, in Argenta and Lombrica alike, and there are often sick or wounded men there ... Nettle will have nothing to do with robbers, nor will the moss-women, and they don’t trust most physicians. So some time ago they began coming to me. I’m not afraid of the forest, I’ve been in its darkest corners with you. Arrow wounds, broken bones, a bad cough – I know how to cure all those, and the Prince trusts me. I was always Dustfinger’s wife to him, even when I was married to another man. Perhaps he was right.’

‘Was he?’ Dustfinger spun round. Someone was clearing his throat in the darkness.

‘Didn’t you say we must be gone before the sun rises?’ Farid’s voice sounded reproachful.

By fire and fairies, he’d forgotten the boy! And Farid was right. Morning couldn’t be far away, and the shadow of the Castle of Night was not the best place to discuss dead husbands.

‘Very well. Catch the martens!’ Dustfinger whispered into the night. ‘But don’t, for heaven’s sake, scare me to death like that again, understand? Or I’ll never let you make yourself invisible again.’



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The Badger's Earth

‘Oh, Sara. It is like a story.’

‘It is a story ... everything is a story. You are a story – I am a story. Miss Minchin is a story.’

Frances Hodgson Burnett,
The Little Princess

Farid followed Dustfinger and Roxane through the night with an expression that must surely be as dark as the sky above them. It hurt to leave Meggie behind in the castle, however sensible it was. And now here was Roxane coming with them too. Although he had to admit that she seemed to know exactly where she was going. They soon came upon the first hiding-place, well concealed behind thorny undergrowth, but it was deserted. In the next they found two men who distrustfully drew their knives, and did not put them back in their belts until Roxane had spoken to them at length. Perhaps they sensed the presence of Dustfinger and Farid, in spite of their invisibility. Fortunately Roxane had once cured a nasty ulcer for one of them, and he finally told her where she would find the Prince.

The Badger's Earth. Farid thought he heard those words twice. ‘Their main hide-out,’ was all that Roxane said. ‘We must be there by daybreak. But they warned me that there are said to be soldiers on the move, a great many of them.’

From then on Farid sometimes thought he heard the clink of swords in the distance, the snorting of horses, voices, marching footsteps – but perhaps he was only imagining it. Soon the first rays of sunlight penetrated the leaf canopy above them, gradually turning their bodies visible again, like reflections on dark water. It was good not to have to keep looking for his own hands and feet, and to see Dustfinger again. Even if he was walking beside Roxane.

Now and then Farid sensed her looking at him, as if she were still searching his dark face for some similarity to Dustfinger. At her farm she had once or twice asked him questions about his mother. Farid would have liked to tell her that his mother had been a princess, much, much more beautiful than Roxane, and that Dustfinger had loved her so dearly that he stayed with her for ten years until death took her from him, leaving him only with their son, their dark-skinned, black-eyed son who now followed him like a shadow. But his age wasn't quite right for this tale, and moreover Dustfinger would probably have been furious if Roxane had asked him for the truth behind it, so in the end Farid told her only that his mother was dead – which was probably correct. If Roxane was stupid enough to think Dustfinger had come back to her only because he had lost another woman, all the better. Every glance that Dustfinger cast her filled Farid's heart to the brim with jealousy. Suppose he decided to stay with her for ever, at the farm with the fragrant fields of herbs? Suppose he stopped wanting to go from one market place to the next, but preferred to live with her, kissing her and laughing with her as he already did only too often, forgetting fire and Farid?

The forest became denser and denser, and the Castle of Night might have been only a bad dream, when they suddenly saw over a dozen men standing among the trees around them. Armed men in ragged clothes. They appeared so silently that even Dustfinger hadn't heard them. They surrounded them with hostile expressions on their faces, knives and swords in their

hands, and stared at the two figures who were still almost transparent around the chests and arms.

‘Hey, Snapper, don’t you know me?’ asked Roxane, going up to one of them. ‘How are your fingers doing?’

The man’s face cleared. He was a heavily built fellow with a scar on his neck. ‘Ah, the herb-witch,’ he said. ‘Of course. Why are you roaming the forest here so early? And what are those ghosts with you?’

‘We’re not ghosts. We’re looking for the Black Prince.’ As Dustfinger moved to Roxane’s side all the men’s weapons turned his way.

‘What are you doing?’ Roxane asked the men angrily. ‘Look at his face. Did you never hear of the fire-dancer? The Prince will set his bear on you if he hears that you threatened him.’

The men put their heads together and scrutinized Dustfinger’s scarred face uneasily.

‘Three scars as pale as cobwebs,’ whispered Snapper. ‘Oh yes, we’ve all heard about him, but only in songs ...’

‘Who says songs can’t be believed?’ Dustfinger breathed into the cool morning air and whispered fire-words until a flame consumed his steaming breath. The robbers flinched back and stared at him, as if this only reinforced their certainty that he was a ghost. However, Dustfinger raised both hands in the air and put the flame out between them as if nothing could be easier. Then he bent down and cooled the palms of his hands on the dewy grass.

‘Did you see that?’ Snapper looked at the others. ‘That’s just what the Prince has always told us about him – he catches fire as you might catch a rabbit, he speaks to it like a lover.’

The robbers took the three into their midst. Farid looked uneasily at the men’s faces as he walked along beside them. They reminded him of other faces, faces from an earlier life,

from a world that he did not like to remember, and he stayed as close as he could to Dustfinger's side.

'Are you sure these are the Prince's men?' Dustfinger asked Roxane in an undertone.

'Oh yes,' she whispered back. 'He can't choose who will follow him.'

Farid did not think this answer very reassuring.

The robbers in Farid's old life had claimed caves full of treasure as their own, caverns more magnificent than the halls of the Castle of Night. The hide-out where Snapper took them could not be compared with those caves. Its entrance, hidden in a crevice in the ground among tall beech trees, was so narrow that you had to squeeze your way in, and even Farid had to duck his head in the passage beyond it. The cave it led to was not much better. Other passages branched off, obviously leading even deeper underground. 'Welcome to the Badger's Earth!' said Snapper, while the men sitting on the floor of the cave looked at them suspiciously. 'Who says that only the Adderhead can dig deep into the ground? There are several men among us who toiled in his mines for years. They found out how you can nest far down in the earth and not have it fall on your head.'

The Prince was alone in a cave to one side of the others; only the bear was with him, and he looked tired. But at the sight of Dustfinger his face brightened, and the news they brought was not so much of a surprise to him as they had expected.

'Ah yes, Sootbird!' he said, and Snapper drew a finger across his throat at the mention of that name. 'I ought to have asked myself much sooner how he could afford the alchemists' powders he uses in his fire-eating shows. The few coins he earns in market places wouldn't run to it. But unfortunately I didn't have him watched until after the attack on the Secret Camp. He soon parted from the other prisoners we freed and met the

Adderhead's informers on the border. While those he betrayed are in the dungeons of the Castle of Night, and there's nothing I can do for them! Here I am stuck in a forest swarming with soldiers. The Adderhead is assembling them up on the road that leads to Ombra.'

'Cosimo?' It was Roxane who spoke the name, and the Prince nodded.

'Yes. I sent him three messengers with three warnings. One came back, but only to say that Cosimo laughed in his face. I'll admit I don't remember him as being quite so stupid. The year he spent away seems to have robbed him of his reason. He's planning to make war on the Adderhead with an army of peasants. It's as if we were to march against the Adderhead ourselves.'

'We'd have a better chance,' said Snapper.

'Yes, I expect we would.' The Black Prince sounded so discouraged that Farid's heart failed him. Secretly, he had always put far more trust in the Prince than in Fenoglio's words, but what could this troop of ragged men digging themselves holes in the forest like rabbits do against the Castle of Night?

The men brought them something to eat, and Roxane looked at Dustfinger's leg. She treated the wound with an ointment that made it smell like spring in the cave for a moment. And Farid couldn't help thinking of Meggie. He remembered a story that he had heard by a fire on a cold night in the desert. It was the tale of a thief who fell in love with a princess; he still remembered it very well. The two were so deeply in love that they could speak to each other over a distance of many miles. Each could hear the other's thoughts even if walls separated them, each knew whether the other was sad or happy ... but intently as Farid listened to his own feelings, he could sense nothing. He couldn't even have said whether Meggie was still alive. She seemed to have gone away, gone away from his

heart, from the world. When he brushed the tears from his eyes, he felt Dustfinger looking at him.

‘I’ll have to rest this wretched leg or it will never heal,’ he said quietly. ‘But we’ll go back. When the time comes ...’

Roxane frowned, but she said nothing. The Prince and Dustfinger began talking so quietly that Farid had to move close to them to make anything out. Roxane put her head on Dustfinger’s lap and was soon asleep. But Farid curled up like a puppy beside him, closed his eyes, and listened to the two men.

The Black Prince wanted to know all about Silvertongue – whether the day of the execution was fixed, where he was held prisoner, how his wound was doing. Dustfinger told him what he knew. And he told him about the book that Meggie had offered the Adderhead as a ransom for her father.

‘A book to hold Death prisoner?’ The Prince laughed incredulously. ‘Has the Adderhead taken to believing in fairy-tales?’

Dustfinger did not reply to that. He said nothing about Fenoglio; he did not say that they were all part of a story that an old man had written. In his place Farid wouldn’t have said so either. The Black Prince probably wouldn’t believe that there were words which could decide even his own fate, words like invisible paths from which you could not turn aside. The bear grunted in his sleep, and Roxane turned her head restlessly. She was holding Dustfinger’s hand as if she wanted to take him into her dreams.

‘You told the boy you’d go back,’ said the Prince. ‘You can come with us.’

‘Are you going to the Castle of Night? Why? Do you plan to storm it with these few men? Or tell the Adderhead that he’s caught the wrong man? With this on your nose?’ Dustfinger put his hand among the blankets lying on the floor, and brought out a bird mask. Bluejay feathers sewn to cracked leather. He put the mask on his scarred face.

‘Many of us have worn that mask before,’ said the Prince. ‘And now they’re going to hang another innocent man for the deeds we’ve done. I can’t allow that! This time it’s a bookbinder. Last time, after we attacked one of the silver transports, they hanged a charcoal-burner just because he had a scar on his arm. His wife is probably still mourning him.’

‘It’s not just the deeds you did. Fenoglio invented most of them!’ Dustfinger sounded irritated. ‘Damn it, Prince, you can’t save Silvertongue. You’ll only die too. Or do you seriously think the Adderhead will let him go just because you’ve turned yourself in?’

‘No, I’m not such a fool as that. But I must do something.’ The Prince put his hand in his bear’s mouth, as he so often did, and as always that hand, as if miraculously, came back intact from between the bear’s teeth.

‘Yes, yes, very well.’ Dustfinger sighed. ‘You and your unwritten rules. You don’t even know Silvertongue! How can you want to die for someone you don’t know?’

‘Who would you die for?’ the Prince asked in return.

Farid saw Dustfinger look at Roxane’s sleeping face – and then turn to him. He quickly closed his eyes.

‘You’d die for Roxane,’ he heard the Prince say.

‘Perhaps,’ said Dustfinger, and through his lashes Farid saw him trace Roxane’s dark brows with his finger. ‘Or perhaps not. Do you have many informers in the Castle of Night?’

‘Yes, indeed. Kitchen-maids, stable boys, even a few of the guards – although they come very expensive – and most useful of all, a falconer who sends me a message now and then by one of his clever birds. I shall hear at once when they’ve fixed the day of the execution. You know the Adderhead doesn’t have such things done in a market place or in front of the common people in the castle courtyard any more, not since you spoiled my punishment so thoroughly for him. He was never a friend of such spectacles anyway. An execution is a serious matter to the

Adderhead. The gallows outside the castle will do for a poor minstrel, there'll be no trouble about that, but the Bluejay will die inside the gate.'

'Yes. If his daughter's voice doesn't open that gate for him,' replied Dustfinger. 'Her voice and a book – a book full of immortality.'

Farid heard the Black Prince laugh. 'That sounds almost like some new song by the Inkweaver!'

'Yes,' replied Dustfinger in a husky voice. 'It sounds just like him, doesn't it?'



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All is Lost

'Tis war! 'Tis war! God's angel stand by ye
And guide your hand.
'Tis war, alas, and guiltless I would be
Of what betides this land.

Matthias Claudius,
War Song

After a few days' rest, Dustfinger's leg was much better, and Farid was just telling the two martens how they'd soon all be stealing into the Castle of Night to rescue Meggie and her parents when bad news came to the Badger's Earth. One of the men who had been watching the road to Ombra brought it. His face was covered with blood and he could hardly keep on his feet.

'They're killing them!' he kept stammering over and over again. 'They're killing them all.'

'Where?' asked the Prince. 'Where exactly?'

'Not two hours from here,' the messenger managed to say. 'Keep going north.'

The Prince left ten men at the Badger's Earth. Roxane tried to persuade Dustfinger to stay too. 'You must spare your leg, or it will never heal,' she said. But he would not listen to her, so she too came on the fast, silent march through the forest.

They heard the sound of battle long before they could see anything. Screams reached Farid's ears, cries of pain, and the whinnying of horses, shrill with fear. A moment came when the Prince signalled to them to go more slowly. A few more paces, bending low, and the ground in front of them dropped steeply to the road that ended, many miles further on, at the gates of Ombra. Dustfinger made Farid and Roxane get down on the ground, although no one was looking their way. Hundreds of men were fighting among the trees down below, but there were no robbers among them. Robbers do not wear shirts of chain mail, breastplates and helmets decked with peacock feathers; they seldom have horses, and never coats of arms embroidered on silken surcoats.

Dustfinger held Roxane close when she began to sob. The sun was sinking behind the hills as the Adderhead's soldiers cut down Cosimo's men one by one. It looked as if the battle had been raging for a long time; the road was covered with dead bodies lying side by side. Only a small troop was still on horseback amidst all this death. Cosimo himself was among them, his beautiful face distorted by rage and fear. For a moment it looked almost as if those few mounted men would be able to carve themselves a breach in the enemy ranks, but then Firefox came among them with a company of men gleaming like deadly beetles in their armour. They mowed down Cosimo and his retinue like dry grass as the sun sank right behind the hills, as red as if all the blood that had been shed was reflected in the sky. Firefox himself struck Cosimo from his horse, and Dustfinger buried his face in Roxane's hair, as if he were tired of seeing Death at work. But Farid did not turn his head away. His face unmoving, he looked at the slaughter and thought of Meggie – Meggie, who perhaps still believed that a little ink could cure anything in this world. Would she believe it if her eyes saw what his were seeing now?

Few of Cosimo's men survived their Prince. Barely a dozen fled into the trees. No one went to the trouble of pursuing

them. The Adderhead's soldiers broke into cries of triumph, and began plundering the corpses like a flock of vultures in human form. They did not get Cosimo's body, however. Firefox himself drove his soldiers off, and had that beautiful corpse loaded on to a horse and taken away.

'Why are they doing that?' asked Farid.

'Why? Because his corpse is the proof that he really is dead this time,' said Dustfinger bitterly.

'Yes, he is indeed,' whispered the Black Prince. 'I suppose you think yourself immortal if you've come back from the dead once. But he wasn't, any more than his men, and now almost all the people of Lombrica will be widows and orphans.'

It was many hours before the Adderhead's soldiers finally moved away, laden with what they could rob from the dead. Darkness was coming on again when silence fell at last among the trees, the silence that is felt only in the presence of Death.

Roxane was the first to find a way down the slope. She was no longer weeping. Her face was fixed and rigid, but whether with anger or pain Farid could not have said. The robbers hesitated before following her, for the first White Women were already standing there among the dead.

Lord of the Story

Iron helmets will not save
Even heroes from the grave.
Good men's blood will drain away
While the wicked win the day.

Heinrich Heine,
Valkyries

Fenoglio was wandering among the dead when the robbers found him. Night fell, but he did not know what night it was. Nor could he remember how many days had passed since he rode out of the gates of Ombra with Cosimo. He knew only one thing: they were all dead. Minerva's husband, his neighbour, the father of the boy who had so often begged him for a story. All dead. And he himself would very likely have been dead too if his horse hadn't shied and thrown him. He had crawled away into the trees, to hide there like an animal and watch the slaughter.

Since the departure of the Adderhead's soldiers he had been stumbling from one corpse to the next, cursing himself, cursing his story, cursing the world he had created. When he felt the hand on his shoulder he actually thought for a moment that Cosimo had risen from the dead yet again, but it was the Black Prince standing behind him.

‘What are you doing here?’ he snarled at him and the men with him. ‘Do you want to die too? Go away and hide, and leave me in peace.’ He struck his brow. His damned head that had invented them all, and with them all the misfortune they were wading through like black, stinking water! He fell on his knees beside a dead man whose open eyes were staring at the sky, and blamed himself furiously – himself, the Adderhead, Cosimo and his haste – and then suddenly fell silent when he saw Dustfinger standing next to the Prince.

‘You!’ he stammered, and got to his feet again, swaying. ‘You’re still alive! You’re not dead yet, even though I wrote it that way.’ He took Dustfinger’s arm and clutched it tightly.

‘Yes, disappointing, isn’t it?’ replied Dustfinger, shaking Fenoglio’s hand roughly off. ‘Is it any comfort to you that no doubt, but for Farid, I’d have been lying as dead and cold as these men? After all, you didn’t foresee him.’

Farid? Oh yes, the boy plucked by Mortimer from his desert story. He was standing beside Dustfinger and staring at Fenoglio with murder in his eyes. No, the boy really did not belong here. Whoever had sent him to protect Dustfinger, it hadn’t been him, Fenoglio! But that was the wretched part of the whole business! With everyone interfering in his story, how could it turn out well?

‘I can’t find Cosimo!’ he muttered. ‘I’ve been looking for him for hours. Have any of you seen him?’

‘Firefox has had his body taken away,’ the Prince replied. ‘I expect they’ll put it on public display so that this time no one can claim he’s still alive.’

Fenoglio stared at him until the bear began to growl. Then he shook his head again and again. ‘I don’t understand it!’ he stammered. ‘How could it happen? Didn’t Meggie read what I wrote for her? Didn’t Roxane find her?’ He looked despairingly at Dustfinger. How well he remembered the day he had

described his death! A good scene, one of the best he'd ever written.

‘Oh yes, Roxane gave Meggie the letter. Ask her yourself if you don’t believe me. Although I don’t think she’ll feel much like talking at the moment.’ Dustfinger pointed to the woman walking among the corpses. Roxane. The beautiful Roxane. She bent over the dead, looked into their faces, and finally knelt down beside a man whom a White Woman was approaching. She quickly put her hands over his ears, bent over his face, and gestured to the two robbers who were following her with torches in their hands. No, she would certainly not feel much like talking just now.

Dustfinger looked at him. Why that reproachful expression? Fenoglio wanted to snap at him. After all, I invented your wife too! But he bit the words back. ‘Very well. So Roxane gave Meggie the letter,’ he said instead. ‘But did Meggie read it?’

Dustfinger looked at him with great dislike. ‘She tried to, but the Adderhead had her taken to the Castle of Night that very evening.’

‘Oh, God!’ Fenoglio looked around. The dead faces of Cosimo’s men stared at him. ‘So that’s it!’ he cried. ‘I thought all this had happened only because Cosimo wanted to set off too soon, but no! The words, my wonderful words ... Meggie can’t have read them, or everything would have been all right!’

‘Nothing would have been all right!’ Dustfinger’s voice was so cutting that Fenoglio involuntarily flinched. ‘Not a man of all these lying here would be dead if you hadn’t brought Cosimo back!’

The Prince and his men stared at Dustfinger, unable to make anything of this. Of course, they had no idea what he was talking about. But obviously Dustfinger knew only too well. Meggie had told him about Cosimo. Or had it been the boy?

‘Why are you staring at him like that?’ Farid challenged the robbers, ranging himself at Dustfinger’s side. ‘It was exactly as

he says! Fenoglio brought Cosimo back from the dead. I was there myself.'

How the fools flinched away! Only the Black Prince looked thoughtfully at Fenoglio.

'What nonsense!' Fenoglio said. 'No one comes back to this world from the dead! Think what a crowd there'd be! I made a new Cosimo, a brand-new one, and everything would have turned out well if Meggie hadn't been interrupted while she read! My Cosimo would have been a wonderful ruler, a—'

Before he could say any more, the Prince's black hand came down over his mouth. 'That's enough,' he said. 'Enough talking while the dead lie here around us. Your Cosimo is dead, wherever he came from, and the man they take for the Bluejay because of your songs may well be dead soon too. You seem to enjoy playing with Death, Inkweaver.'

Fenoglio tried to protest, but the Black Prince had already turned to his men. 'Go on looking for the wounded!' he told them. 'And hurry! It's time we got off this road.'

They found barely two dozen survivors. Two dozen among hundreds of dead. When the robbers set off again with the wounded men, Fenoglio staggered after them in silence without asking where they were going. 'The old man is following us!' he heard Dustfinger tell the Prince. 'Where else would he go?' was all the Prince replied – and Dustfinger said nothing. But he kept well away from Fenoglio, as if he were Death itself.



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Michael Kongehl,
'On the White Art',
Die Weisse und die Schwarze Kunst

When Mortola had Mo's cell unlocked, Meggie was just telling him about the Laughing Prince's festivities, the tightrope-walker and the Black Prince and Farid's juggling with the torches. Mo put his arm protectively round her as the bolts were shot back and Mortola came into the cell, flanked by Basta and the Piper. The sunlight falling into the room made Basta's face look like boiled lobster.

'Look at that, what an idyll! Father and daughter reunited,' sneered Mortola. 'Truly touching!'

'Hurry up!' the guard told her through the door, low-voiced. 'If the Adderhead hears that I let you in to see him, they'll put me in the pillory for three days!'

'And if they do I've paid you well enough, haven't I?' was all Mortola replied, while Basta went up to Mo with a vicious smile.

‘Well, Silvertongue,’ he purred, ‘didn’t I say you’d all fall into our trap yet?’

‘You look more as if it was you who fell into Dustfinger’s trap,’ replied Mo, quickly putting Meggie behind him when, by way of answer, Basta snapped his knife open.

‘Basta! Stop that!’ Mortola snapped at him. ‘We don’t have time for your games.’

Meggie came out from behind Mo’s back as Mortola moved towards her. She wanted to show the old woman that she wasn’t afraid of her (even if, of course, that was only a brave lie).

‘Those were interesting words that you had hidden in your clothing,’ Mortola said to her, low-voiced. ‘The Adderhead was particularly interested in the part about three very special words. Oh, see how pale she’s gone around her pretty little nose! Yes, the Adderhead knows about your plans, little pigeon, and he knows now that Mortola isn’t as stupid as he thought. But unfortunately he still wants the book you promised him. The fool really does believe that you two can keep his death imprisoned in a book.’ The Magpie wrinkled her nose at such princely stupidity, and came yet closer to Meggie. ‘Yes, he’s a gullible fool, like all princes!’ she whispered to Meggie. ‘We both know that, don’t we? For the words you carried with you also say that Cosimo the Fair will conquer this castle, and kill the Adderhead, with the aid of the book your father is to bind for him. But how can that be so? Cosimo is dead, and for good this time. Oh, how alarmed you look, you little witch!’ Her bony fingers pinched Meggie’s cheeks hard. Mo went to strike her hand away, but Basta faced him with the knife. ‘Your tongue has lost its magic power, my little darling!’ said the Magpie. ‘The words are only words. The book your father is to bind for the Adderhead will be nothing but a blank book – and once the Silver Prince finally realizes that, nothing will save you two from the hangman. And Mortola will be avenged at last.’

‘Leave her alone, Mortola!’ Mo reached for Meggie’s hand in spite of Basta’s knife, and Meggie clasped his fingers firmly in hers as thoughts raced through her mind in confusion. Cosimo was dead? For the second time? What did that mean? Nothing, she thought. Nothing at all, Meggie. Because you never read the words that were to protect him.

Mortola seemed to notice her relief, for the Magpie’s eyes became as narrow as her lips. ‘Ah, so that doesn’t trouble you? Do you think I’d lie to you? Or do you believe in that book of immortality yourself? Let me tell you something.’ The Magpie’s thin fingers dug into Meggie’s shoulder. ‘It’s a book, no more, and I am sure you and your father remember what my son used to do with books! Capricorn would never have been fool enough to entrust his life to one, even if you’d promised him immortality for it! And furthermore ... those three words that it seems must not be written in the book ... I know them now too.’

‘What do you mean by that, Mortola?’ asked Mo quietly. ‘Do you by any chance dream of putting Basta here on the Adderhead’s throne? Or even yourself?’

The Magpie cast a quick glance at the guard outside the cell door, but he had his back to them, and she turned to Mo again, her face expressionless. ‘Whatever I intend to do, Silvertongue,’ she hissed at him, ‘you won’t live to see it. This story is over for you. Why isn’t he in chains?’ she snapped at the Piper. ‘He’s still a prisoner, isn’t he? At least tie his hands while you move him.’

Meggie was about to protest, but Mo cast her a warning glance.

‘Believe me, Silvertongue,’ said Mortola in a low voice as the Piper roughly tied Mo’s hands behind his back, ‘even if the Adderhead sets you free after you’ve made him his book, you won’t get far. And Mortola’s word is worth more than the words of a poet. Take the pair of them to the Old Chamber!’ she

ordered as she went to the door again. 'But watch them closely, and make sure that not a single book falls into their hands.'

The Old Chamber lay in the most remote part of the Castle of Night, far from the halls where the Adderhead held court. The corridors down which Basta and the Piper led them were dusty and deserted. No silver adorned the columns and doors here; there was no glass in the draughty windows.

The chamber whose door the Piper finally opened, with a mocking bow to Mo, seemed to have been unoccupied for a long time. The pink fabric of the bed hangings was moth-eaten. The bunches of flowers standing in pitchers in the window niches were long dried up; dust was caught in the withered blossoms, and lay thick and dirty white on the chests that stood under the windows. In the middle of the chamber was a table: a long wooden surface laid on trestles. A man stood behind it, as pale as paper, with white hair and inkstains on his fingers. He gave Meggie only a quick glance, but he studied Mo as thoroughly as if someone had asked him to deliver an expert opinion on him.

'Is this the man?' he asked the Piper. 'He looks as if he'd never held a book in his hand in his life, let alone had the faintest idea how to bind one.'

Meggie saw a smile steal over Mo's face. Without a word he went over to the table and examined the tools lying on it.

'My name is Taddeo, and I am the librarian here,' went on the stranger, sounding annoyed. 'I don't suppose that a single one of these objects means anything to you, but I can assure you that the paper you see there alone is worth more than your wretched robber's life. The finest product of the best paper mill for a thousand miles around, enough to bind more than two books of five hundred pages. Although a genuine bookbinder, of course, would prefer parchment to any paper, however good.'

Mo held his bound hands out to the Piper. 'There could be two opinions about that,' he said, as the silver-nosed minstrel, his expression sullen, undid his bonds. 'You should be glad I asked for paper. Parchment for this book would cost a fortune. Quite apart from the hundreds of goats who would have to give their lives for it. And as for the quality of these sheets, it's by no means as good as you claim. The texture is coarse, but if there's no better available it will have to do. I hope at least it's well sized. As for the rest of this –' Mo's expert fingers passed over the tools lying ready – 'it looks serviceable.'

Knives and bone folders, hemp, strong thread and needles to stitch the pages, glue and a pot to heat it in, beechwood for the back and front covers, leather to go over them – Mo picked them all up, as he did in his own workshop, before he set to work. Then he looked around. 'What about the press and the sewing frame? And what am I going to heat the glue with?'

'You ... you'll have everything you need before evening,' replied Taddeo, in some confusion.

'The clasps are all right, but I shall need another file, and leather and linen for the tapes.'

'Of course, of course. Anything you say.' The librarian nodded, very ready to oblige now, while an incredulous smile spread over his pale face.

'Good.' Mo leaned on the table, supporting himself with both hands. 'I'm sorry, but I'm not very strong on my legs yet. I hope the leather is more flexible than the parchment, and as for the glue,' he added, picking up the pot and sniffing, 'well, we'll see if it's good enough. And bring me some paste too. I'll use glue only for the covers. Bookworms like the flavour too much.'

Meggie relished the sight of the surprised faces. Even the Piper was staring at Mo in disbelief. Only Basta remained unmoved. He knew that he had brought the librarian a bookbinder, not a robber.

‘My father needs a chair,’ said Meggie, with an imperious glance at the librarian. ‘Can’t you see he’s injured? Is he supposed to work standing up?’

‘Standing up? No ... no, of course not! By no means. I’ll have an armchair brought at once,’ answered the librarian distractedly. He was still staring at Mo. ‘You ... er ... you know a remarkable amount about books for a highwayman.’

Mo gave him a smile. ‘Yes, don’t I?’ he said. ‘Perhaps the highwayman was once a bookbinder? Don’t they say that all kinds of professions are to be found among the outlaws? Farmers, cobblers, physicians, minstrels—’

‘Never mind what he once was,’ the Piper interrupted. ‘He’s a murderer anyway, so don’t fall for his soft voice, bookworm. He kills without batting an eyelid. Ask Basta if you don’t believe me.’

‘Yes, very true!’ Basta rubbed his burned skin. ‘He’s more dangerous than a nest of vipers. And his daughter’s no better. I hope those knives won’t give you any silly ideas,’ he said to Mo. ‘The guards will be counting them regularly, and they’ll cut off one of your daughter’s fingers for every knife that goes missing. And the same applies to any other stupid tricks you try. Do you understand?’

Mo did not answer him, but he looked at the knives as if to count them for safety’s sake. ‘Oh, do get him a chair!’ said Meggie to the librarian impatiently as Mo leaned on the table again.

‘Yes, of course! At once!’ Taddeo hurried away, but the Piper gave an ugly laugh.

‘Listen to the little witch! Ordering people about like a prince’s brat! Well, not surprising, is it, since she claims to be the daughter of a man who can keep Death a prisoner between two wooden covers! What about you, Basta? Do you believe her story?’

Basta put his hand to the amulet hanging round his neck. It was not a rabbit's paw, as he had worn in Capricorn's service, but something that looked suspiciously like a human finger-bone. 'Who knows?' he muttered.

'Yes, who knows?' agreed Mo, without turning to look at the two of them. 'But I can summon Death, anyway, can't I, Basta? So can Meggie.'

The Piper cast Basta a swift glance.

Basta had pale blotches on his burned skin. 'All I know,' he growled, his hand still on his amulet, 'is that you should have been dead and buried long ago, Silvertongue. And the Adderhead would do better to listen to Mortola instead of your witchy daughter. He ate out of her hand, did the Silver Prince. He fell for her lies.'

The Piper straightened his back, as ready to attack as the viper on his master's coat of arms. 'Fell for her lies?' he said, in his curiously strained voice. He was a good head taller than Basta. 'The Adderhead falls for nothing anyone says. He is a great ruler, greater than any other. Firefox sometimes forgets that, and so does Mortola. Don't go making the same mistake. And now get out. The Adderhead's orders are that no one who ever worked for Capricorn is to be on guard in this room. Could that mean that he doesn't trust you?'

Basta's voice turned to a hiss. 'You worked for Capricorn once yourself, Piper!' he said through compressed lips. 'You'd be nothing but for him.'

'Oh yes? You see this nose?' The Piper stroked his silver nose. 'I once had a nose like yours, an ordinary nose of flesh and blood. It hurt losing it, but the Adderhead had a better one made for me, and since then I don't sing for drunken fire-raisers, I sing only for him – a real prince whose family is older than the towers of this castle. If you don't want to serve him, then go back to Capricorn's fortress. Maybe his ghost is

haunting those burned-out walls – oh, but you’re afraid of ghosts, aren’t you, Basta?’

The two men were standing so close that the blade of Basta’s knife wouldn’t have fitted between them.

‘Yes, I am afraid of ghosts,’ he hissed. ‘But at least I don’t spend every night on my knees, whimpering because I’m afraid the White Women might fetch me away, like your fine new master.’

The Piper struck Basta in the face so hard that his head hit the door frame. Blood ran down his burned cheek in a trail of red. He wiped it away with the back of his hand. ‘Take care to avoid dark corridors, Piper!’ he whispered. ‘You don’t have a nose any more, but one can always find something else to cut off.’

When the librarian came back with the chair Basta had gone, and the Piper left too after posting two guards outside the door. ‘No one comes in or goes out except the librarian!’ Meggie heard him ordering brusquely before he left. ‘And check up regularly to make sure the Bluejay is working.’

Taddeo smiled awkwardly at Mo as the Piper’s footsteps died away outside, as if he felt he should apologise for the soldiers guarding the door. ‘Excuse me,’ he said quietly, placing the chair at the table for him, ‘but I have a few books which are showing strange signs of damage. Could you maybe take a look at them?’

Meggie had to suppress a smile, but Mo acted as if the librarian had asked him the most natural question in the world. ‘Of course,’ he said.

Taddeo nodded, and glanced at the door. One of the guards was pacing up and down outside, looking sullen. ‘But Mortola mustn’t know, so I’ll come back when it’s dark,’ he whispered to Mo. ‘Luckily she goes to bed early. There are wonderful books in this castle, but sad to say no one here can appreciate them. It was different in the past, but the past is over and forgotten. I’ve

heard matters aren't much better at the Laughing Prince's castle these days, but at least they have Balbulus there. We were all very sorry when the Adderhead gave his daughter our best illuminator to take with her as her dowry! Since then I'm not allowed to employ more than two scribes and one illuminator of only average talent. The only copies I can commission are of manuscripts about the Adderhead's ancestors, the mining and working of silver, or the art of war. Last year, when wood ran short again, Firefox even heated the small banqueting hall with my finest books.' Tears came to Taddeo's clouded eyes.

'Bring me the books whenever you like,' said Mo.

The old librarian passed the hem of his dark blue tunic over his eyes. 'Oh yes!' he murmured. 'Oh yes, I will. Thank you.'

Then he was gone. Sighing, Mo sat down in the chair that Taddeo had brought him. 'Very well,' he said. 'Let's get down to work. A book to keep Death at bay – what an idea! It's just a pity it's for this butcher. You'll have to help me, Meggie, with the folding and stitching, the pressing ...' She just nodded. Of course she would help him. There were few things she liked doing better.

It felt so familiar, watching Mo at work again – setting the parchment straight, folding it, cutting and stitching it. He worked more slowly than usual, and his hand kept going to his chest and the place where Mortola had wounded him. But Meggie could tell that carrying out the familiar movements did him good, even if some of the tools were not like those he was used to. The actions had been the same for hundreds of years, in both this world and the other one.

After only a few hours the Old Chamber had something curiously familiar about it, like a refuge and not just another prison. When twilight began to fall outside, the librarian and a servant brought them a couple of oil lamps. The warm light almost made the dusty room look full of life, for the first time in ages.

‘It’s a long while since any lamps were lit in this room,’ said Taddeo, putting a second one on the table for Mo.

‘Who lived in this room last?’ asked Mo.

‘Our first princess,’ replied Taddeo. ‘Her daughter Violante married the Laughing Prince’s son. I wonder if Violante knows that Cosimo has died for the second time.’ He looked sadly out of the window. A moist wind was blowing in, and Mo weighted the paper down with a piece of wood. ‘Violante came into the world with a birthmark that disfigured her face,’ the librarian went on, in an abstracted voice, as if he were telling this story not to them but to some distant hearer. ‘Everyone said it was a punishment, a curse from the fairies because her mother had fallen in love with a minstrel. The Adderhead had her mother banished to this part of the castle as soon as the baby was born, and she lived here with her daughter until she died ... died very suddenly.’

‘That’s a sad story,’ said Mo.

‘Believe me,’ replied Taddeo bitterly, ‘if all the sad stories these walls have seen were written down in books, we could fill every room in the castle with them.’

Meggie looked round as if she could see all those books of sad stories. ‘How old was Violante when she was betrothed to Cosimo and sent to Ombra?’ she asked.

‘Seven. And the daughters of our present princess were only six when they were betrothed and sent away. We all hope she’ll have a son this time!’ Taddeo let his eyes linger on the parchment that Mo had cut to size, the tools ... ‘It’s good to see life in this room again,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ll come back with the books as soon as I’m sure that Mortola is asleep.’

‘Six, seven years old – my God, Meggie,’ said Mo when Taddeo had gone, ‘here you are, thirteen already, and I still haven’t sent you away, let alone betrothed you to anyone!’

It felt good to laugh, even if the sound echoed strangely in this high-ceilinged room.

Taddeo did not come back until hours later. Mo was still working, although he put his hand to his chest more and more often, and Meggie had already tried persuading him once or twice to lie down and sleep. 'Sleep?' was all he said. 'I haven't slept properly for a single night in this castle. And anyway, I want to see your mother again, and I won't be able to do that until this book is finished.'

The librarian brought him two volumes. 'Look at this!' he whispered, pushing the first over to Mo. 'See those places where the binding is eaten away? And inside it looks almost as if the ink were rusting. There are holes in the parchment. You can hardly read some of the words now! What can have caused it? Worms, beetles? I never used to concern myself with these things. I had an assistant who knew all about these sicknesses that books suffer, but one morning he disappeared. They say he joined the robbers in the forest.'

Mo picked up the book, opened it, and passed his hand over the pages. 'Good heavens!' he said. 'Who painted this? I've never seen such beautiful illuminations.'

'Balbulus,' replied Taddeo. 'The illuminator who was sent away with Violante. He was very young when he painted this book. Look, his script was still a little awkward, but now his mastery is impeccable.'

'How do you know?' asked Meggie.

The librarian lowered his voice. 'Violante has a book sent to me now and then. She knows how much I admire the craftsmanship of Balbulus, and she knows there's no one else left in the Castle of Night who loves books. Not since her mother died. Do you see the chests there?' He pointed to the heavy, dusty wooden chests by the door and under the windows. 'Violante's mother kept her books in them, hidden among her clothes. She would take them out only in the evening and show them to the little girl, although I suppose the child hardly understood a word of what her mother read her at

the time. But then, soon after Capricorn had disappeared, Mortola came here. The Adderhead had asked her to train the maids in the kitchen – no one said what exactly they were to be trained to do. Then Violante's mother asked me to hide her books in the library, because Mortola had her room searched at least twice a day – she never found out what for. This,' he said, pointing to the book that Mo was still leafing through, 'was one of her favourites. The little girl would point to a picture and then her mother told her a story about it. I was going to give it to Violante when they sent her away, but she left it behind in this room. Perhaps because she didn't want to take any memories of this sad place to her new life with her. All the same, I'd like to save it as a memento of her mother. You know, I think that a book always keeps something of its owners, woodworms, the corrosive effect of the ink, who knows what else ... between its pages.'

'Yes, I think so too,' said Mo. 'I'm sure of it.'

'And?' The old man looked at him hopefully. 'Do you know how it can be preserved from further harm?'

Mo carefully closed the book. 'Yes, but it won't be easy. Does the second book look the same?'

'Oh, that one –' the librarian cast another nervous look at the door – 'well, it's not in such a bad way yet. But I thought you might like to see it. Balbulus completed it not long ago, for Violante. It contains,' he said, looking uncertainly at Mo, 'it contains all the songs that the strolling players sing about the Bluejay. As far as I know there are only two copies. Violante owns one, and the other is before you and is a copy that she had specially made for me. They say the man who wrote the songs didn't want them written down, but any minstrel will sing them to you for a few coins. That was how Violante collected them and had them written out by Balbulus. The strolling players, you see – well, they're like walking books here, where real books are so few and far between! You know,' he whispered to Mo as he opened the volume, 'I sometimes think

this world would have lost its memory long ago but for the Motley Folk. Unfortunately the Adderhead is only too fond of hanging them! I've often suggested sending a scribe to see them before they're executed, to get all those beautiful songs written down before the words die with them, but no one in this castle listens to an old librarian.'

'No, very likely not,' murmured Mo, but Meggie could tell from his voice that he hadn't been listening to anything Taddeo had said. Mo was immersed in the letters, the beautiful written characters flowing over the parchment in front of him like a delicate river of ink.

'Forgive my curiosity.' Taddeo cleared his throat, embarrassed. 'I've heard that you deny being the Bluejay ... but if you will allow me ...' He took the book from Mo's hand and opened it at a page that Balbulus had illuminated lavishly. A man stood between two trees, so wonderfully painted that Meggie thought she could hear the rustle of the leaves. He wore a bird-mask over his face. 'That's how Balbulus painted the Bluejay,' whispered Taddeo, 'just as the songs describe him, dark-haired, tall ... doesn't he look like you?'

'I don't know,' said Mo. 'He's wearing a mask, isn't he?'

'Yes, yes, indeed.' Taddeo was still looking intently at him. 'But did you know that they say something else about the Bluejay? They say he has a very beautiful voice, not at all like the bird that shares his name. It's said that he can tame bears and wolves with a few words. Forgive me for being so forward, but –' he lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone – '*you* have a very beautiful voice. Mortola tells strange tales of it. And then, when you have the scar too ...' He stared at Mo's arm.

'Oh, you mean this, don't you?' Mo placed his finger under a line beside which Balbulus had painted a pack of white dogs, and read: '*High on his left arm he will bear the scar to his dying day.* Yes, I do have a scar like that, but I didn't get it from the dogs in this song.' He put his hand to his arm, as if

remembering the day when Basta had found them in the tumbledown hut full of broken pots and tiles.

However, the old librarian took a step back. ‘So you *are* him!’ he breathed. ‘The hope of the poor, the terror of butchers, avenger and robber, as much at home in the forest as the bears and wolves?’

Mo shut the book and pressed the metal clasps into the leather-covered binding. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I’m not, but thank you very much for the book, all the same. It’s a long time since I had one in my hands, and it will be good to have something to read again, won’t it, Meggie?’

‘Yes,’ was all she said, taking the book from his hand. Songs about the Bluejay. What would Fenoglio have said if he’d known that Violante had had them written down in secret? And they might offer so much help! Her heart leaped as she thought of the possibilities, but Taddeo immediately dashed her hopes.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he said, taking the book gently but firmly from her hands again. ‘But I can’t leave either of the books here with you. Mortola has been talking to me – to everyone who has anything to do with the library. She’s threatened to have anyone who so much as brings a book into this room blinded. Blinded, imagine it! What a threat, when only our eyes reveal the world of words to us! I’ve already risked far too much coming here with them at all, but I love those books so much that I had to ask your advice. Please, tell me what I must do to save them!’

Meggie was so disappointed that she would have turned down his request point blank, but of course Mo saw things differently. Mo thought only of the sick books. ‘Of course,’ he said to Taddeo. ‘I’d better write it down for you. It will take time – weeks, months – and I don’t know if you’ll be able to get all the materials you need, but it’s worth a try. I’m not happy about suggesting this, but I’m afraid you’ll have to take at least the first book apart, because if you’re to save it the pages must

bleach in the sun. If you don't know how to go about it – and it must be done with the utmost care – I'll be happy to do it for you. Mortola can watch if she wants, to make sure I'm not doing anything dangerous.'

'Oh, thank you!' The old man bowed deeply as he put the two books firmly under his thin arm. 'Many, many thanks. I really do most fervently hope the Adderhead will let you live, and if he doesn't that he grants you a quick death.'

Meggie would very much have liked to give him the answer this remark deserved, but Taddeo scurried away too fast on his grasshopper legs.

'Mo, don't you help him!' she said when the guard outside had bolted the door again. 'Why should you? He's a miserable coward!'

'Oh, I can understand him,' said Mo. 'I wouldn't like to do without my eyes either, even though we have useful inventions like Braille in our own world.'

'All the same, I wouldn't help him.' Meggie loved her father for his strangely soft heart, but her own could not summon up any sympathy for Taddeo. She imitated his voice. 'I hope he grants you a quick death! How can anyone say such a thing?'

But Mo wasn't listening. 'Have you ever seen such beautiful books, Meggie?' he asked, lying down on the bed.

'You bet I have!' she said indignantly. 'Any book I'm allowed to read is more beautiful, right?'

But Mo did not reply. He had turned his back to her and was breathing deeply and peacefully. Obviously sleep had found its way to him at last.



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Kindness and Mercy

Here are we five or six strung up, you see,
And here the flesh that all too well we fed,
Bit by bit eaten and rotten, rent and shred,
And we the bones grow dust and ash withal.

François Villon,
tr. A.C. Swinburne,
Ballade of the Hanged Men

‘**W**hen are we going back?’ Farid asked Dustfinger this question several times a day, and every time he got the same answer: ‘Not yet.’

‘But we’ve been here so long.’ It was almost two weeks since the blood-bath in the forest, and he was sick and tired of hanging around in the Badger’s Earth. ‘What about Meggie? You promised we’d go back!’

All Dustfinger said to that was, ‘If you go on pressing me so hard I shall forget that promise.’ Then he went to Roxane. She was busy day and night, nursing the wounded they had found among the dead, in the hope that at least these few would return to Ombra, but some of them she tended in vain. He will stay with her, thought Farid every time he saw Dustfinger sitting beside her. And I’ll have to go back to the Castle of Night alone. The thought hurt like fire biting him.

On the fifteenth day, when Farid felt he would never be able to wash the smell of mouse droppings and pale mushrooms off his skin, two of the Black Prince's informers brought identical news: the Adderhead's wife had borne him a son. To celebrate this event, so his criers were announcing in every market place, in exactly two weeks' time he would show his great kindness and mercy by setting free all the prisoners held in the dungeons of the Castle of Night. Including the Bluejay.

'Nonsense!' said Dustfinger, when Farid told him about it. 'The Adderhead has a roast quail where other people have a heart. He would never set anyone free out of mercy, however many sons were born to him. No, if he really intends to let them go it's because Fenoglio wrote it that way, and for no other reason.'

Fenoglio seemed to share this opinion. Ever since the blood-bath he had spent most of his time sitting in some dark corner of the Badger's Earth, looking gloomy and scarcely saying a word, but now he started defiantly announcing to anyone who would listen that the good news was due solely to him. No one took any notice of him, no one knew what he was talking about – except for Dustfinger, who was still avoiding him like the plague in human form. 'Listen to the old man! How he boasts and brags!' he said to Farid. 'Cosimo and his men are hardly cold in the ground and he's forgotten them already. I hope he drops dead himself!'

The Black Prince, of course, believed in the Adderhead's mercy as little as Dustfinger did, in spite of Fenoglio's assurances that exactly what the informers had said would really happen. The robbers sat together until late into the night, discussing what to do. They would not let Farid join this council, but Dustfinger was with them.

'What's their plan? Tell me!' Farid asked him, when he finally came back from the cave where the robbers had been putting their heads together for hours on end.

‘They’re going to set out in a week’s time.’

‘Where for? The Castle of Night?’

‘Yes.’ Dustfinger didn’t seem half as pleased as he was. ‘Good heavens, you’re fidgeting like fire when the wind blows into it,’ he snapped at Farid irritably. ‘We’ll see if you’re still so happy once we get there. We’ll have to crawl underground like worms, and go much deeper there than here.’

‘Even deeper?’

But of course. Farid pictured Mount Adder before him: there wasn’t anywhere to hide, not a bush, not a tree.

‘There’s an abandoned mine at the foot of the north slope.’ Dustfinger made a face, as if the mere thought of the place turned his stomach. ‘Some ancestor of the Adderhead must have dug too deep there, and several galleries fell in, but that’s so long ago that obviously not even the Adderhead himself remembers the mine. Not a pleasant place, but a good hide-out, and the only one on Mount Adder. The bear found the entrance.’

A mine. Farid swallowed. The thought of it left him struggling for air. ‘Then what?’ he asked. ‘What do we do when we get there?’

‘Wait. Wait to see if the Adderhead really keeps his promise.’

‘Wait? Is that all?’

‘You’ll learn everything else soon enough.’

‘Then we’re going too?’

‘Did you have anything else in mind?’

Farid hugged him more tightly than he had for a long time. Even though he knew that Dustfinger did not particularly like to be hugged.

‘No,’ said Roxane when the Black Prince offered to have her escorted back to Ombra by one of his men before they set out.

‘I’m coming with you. If you can spare a man, then send him to my children to tell them I’ll be home soon.’

Soon! Farid wondered exactly when that was going to be, but he said nothing. Although the time when they would set out was now fixed, the days still passed terribly slowly, and almost every night he dreamed of Meggie. Those were bad dreams, full of darkness and fear. When the day of their departure finally came, half a dozen robbers stayed in the Badger’s Earth to go on tending the wounded. The rest set out on the road to the Castle of Night: thirty men in ragged clothing, but well armed. And Roxane. And Fenoglio.

‘You’re taking the old man too?’ Dustfinger asked the Prince in astonishment when he saw Fenoglio among the men. ‘Are you crazy? Send him back to Ombra. Take him anywhere else, straight to the White Women for preference, but send him away!’

However, the Prince wouldn’t hear of it. ‘What do you have against him?’ he asked. ‘He’s a harmless old man. And don’t start telling me again how he can bring the dead to life! Even my bear likes him. He’s written us some fine songs, and he can tell wonderful stories, even if he has no appetite for them just now. And he doesn’t want to go back to Ombra anyway.’

‘I’m not surprised, considering all the widows and orphans he’s made there,’ said Dustfinger bitterly, and when Fenoglio looked his way he cast him so icy a glance that the old man quickly turned his head again.

It was a silent march. The trees whispered above their heads, as if warning them not to take a step further south, and once or twice Dustfinger had to summon fire to chase away beings that none of them could see, although they sensed them. Farid was tired, tired to death, his face and his arms all scratched with thorns, by the time the silver towers finally appeared above the treetops. ‘Like a crown on a bald head!’ whispered one of the robbers, and for a moment Farid felt he could physically grasp

the fear that these ragged men felt at the sight of the mighty fortress. No doubt they were all glad when the Prince led them to the north slope of Mount Adder, and the tops of the towers disappeared again. The earth fell in folds like a crumpled garment on this side of the hill, and the few trees cowered low, as if they heard the sound of axes too often. Farid had never seen such trees before. Their leaves seemed as black as night itself, and their bark was prickly like a hedgehog. Red berries grew on the branches. 'Mortola's berries!' Dustfinger whispered to him as he picked a handful in passing. 'She's said to have scattered them everywhere at the foot of this hill, until they were sprinkled all over the ground. The trees grow very fast, they shoot up from the earth like mushrooms and keep all other trees away. Bitterberry trees, they're called. Everything about them is poisonous – their berries and their leaves. And their bark burns the skin worse than fire.' Farid dropped the berries, and wiped his hand on his trousers.

A little later, when it was pitch dark, they almost ran into one of the patrols that the Adderhead regularly sent out, but the bear warned them in time. The mounted men appeared among the trees like silver beetles. Moonlight was reflected on their breastplates, and Farid hardly dared to breathe as he ducked down into a crevice in the ground with Dustfinger and Roxane, waiting for the hoofbeats to die away. They stole on, like mice under the eyes of a cat, until they had finally reached their goal.

Wild vines and rubble hid the entrance. The Prince was the first to force his way down into the bowels of the earth. Farid hesitated when he saw how steep the climb down into the darkness looked. 'Come on!' whispered Dustfinger impatiently. 'The sun will soon rise, and the Adder's soldiers aren't going to mistake you for a squirrel.'

'But it smells like a burial vault,' said Farid, and he looked longingly up at the sky.

‘The boy has a good nose!’ said Snapper, before pushing his way past him, grim-faced. ‘Yes, there are many dead men down there. The mountain devoured them because they dug too deep. You don’t see them, but you smell them. People say they stop up the galleries like a cargo of dead fish.’

Horried, Farid looked at him, but Dustfinger just pushed him in the back. ‘Look, how often do I have to tell you it’s not the dead but the living you should fear? Come on, make a few sparks dance on your fingertips to give us a light.’

The robbers had settled in those galleries that were not buried in rubble. They had given the roofs and walls additional props, but Farid didn’t trust the beams now braced against the stone and the ground. How could they support the weight of a whole mountain? He thought he heard it sighing and groaning, and while he made himself as comfortable as he could on the dirty blankets that the robbers had spread on the hard ground, he suddenly remembered Sootbird again. But the Prince only laughed when he anxiously asked about him. ‘No, Sootbird doesn’t know about this place, or any of our hideouts. He’s often tried to get us to take him along, but who’s going to trust such a wretched fire-eater? The only reason he knew about the Secret Camp was because he’s one of the strolling players.’

All the same, Farid did not feel safe. Almost a week yet to go before the Adderhead freed his prisoners! It would be a long wait. He was already wishing himself back among the mouse droppings in the Badger’s Earth. During the night he kept staring at the rubble closing off the galleries where they were sleeping. He thought he heard pale fingers scraping at the stones. ‘Put your hands over your ears, then!’ was all Dustfinger said when Farid shook him awake to say so, and he put his arms round Roxane again. Dustfinger was having bad dreams, the kind he had often had in the other world, but now it was Roxane who calmed him and whispered him back to sleep. Her quiet voice, soft with love, reminded Farid of Meggie’s, and he missed Meggie so much that he felt ashamed of his weakness. In

this darkness, surrounded by the dead, it was difficult to believe that she was missing him too. Suppose she had forgotten him, the way Dustfinger often forgot him now that Roxane was here? Only Meggie had made him forget his jealousy, but Meggie wasn't with him now.

On the second night a boy came to the mine. He worked in the stables of the Castle of Night, and had been spying for the Black Prince ever since the Piper had his brother hanged. He said that the Adderhead would let the prisoners go along the road leading down to the harbour, on condition that they boarded a ship there and never returned.

'The road to the harbour. Ah,' was all the Prince said when the informer had gone again – and he set out with Dustfinger that same night. Farid didn't ask if he could go too. He simply followed them.

The road was little more than a footpath leading through the trees. It ran straight down Mount Adder, as if in a hurry to slip under the canopy of leaves. 'The Adderhead pardoned a troop of prisoners once before and let them go along this road,' said the Prince, when they were under the trees at the roadside. 'And they did reach the sea without mishap, just as he had promised, but the ship waiting for them was a slave ship, and they say the Adderhead got a particularly fine silver bridle for those prisoners, a scant dozen of them.'

Slaves? Farid remembered markets where people were sold, and buyers gaped at them and felt them as if they were cattle. Girls with blonde hair had been in great demand.

'Don't look as if Meggie had been sold already!' said Dustfinger. 'The Prince will think of something – won't you?'

The Black Prince tried to smile, but he couldn't conceal the fact that he was eyeing the road with great concern. 'They must never reach that ship,' he said. 'And we can only hope that the Adderhead doesn't send too many soldiers to escort them. We must hide them quickly – in the mine at first, that will be best,

until everything's quietened down again. And very likely,' he added almost as an afterthought, 'we shall need fire.'

Dustfinger blew on his fingers until flames as delicate as butterfly wings were dancing there. 'What do you think I'm still here for?' he asked. 'Fire there shall be. But I will not take a sword in my hand, in case that's what you're hoping. You know I'm no good with such things.'

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A Visit

‘If I cannot get me forth out of this house,’ he thought, ‘I am a dead man!’

R.L. Stevenson,
The Black Arrow

When Meggie woke, she didn’t know for a moment where she was. In Elinor’s house? she wondered. With Fenoglio? But then she saw Mo bending low over the big table, binding a book. *The* book. Five hundred blank pages. They were in the Castle of Night, and Mo was to have the book finished tomorrow ... A flash of lightning illuminated the soot-blackened ceiling, and the thunder that followed sounded menacingly loud, but it wasn’t the storm that had woken Meggie. She had heard voices. The guards. There was someone at the door. Mo had heard it too.

‘Meggie, he mustn’t work such long hours. It could bring the fever back,’ the Barn Owl had told her that very morning, before they took him down to the dungeons again. But what could she do about it? Mo sent her to bed the moment she began yawning too often. (‘That was the twenty-third yawn, Meggie. Go on, bed for you or you’ll be dead on your feet before this damned book is finished.’) Then it would be ages before he went to sleep himself. He stayed up cutting, folding

and stitching until it was nearly dawn. He'd done that tonight as well.

When one of the guards opened the door, Meggie thought for a dreadful moment that Mortola had come to kill Mo after all, before the Adderhead let him go. But it was not the Magpie. The Adderhead stood in the doorway, breathing heavily. Two servants stood behind him, their faces pale with exhaustion, carrying silver candelabras from which wax dripped to the floorboards. Their master, treading heavily, approached the table at which Mo worked, and stared at the book. It was almost finished.

'What are you doing here?' Mo still had the paperknife in his hand. The Adderhead stared at him. His eyes were even more bloodshot than on the night when Meggie had made her bargain with him.

'How much longer?' he demanded. 'My son is crying. He cries all night. He feels the White Women coming close, just as I do. Now they want to fetch him away too, him and me at the same time. Folk say they're particularly hungry on stormy nights.'

Mo put the knife down. 'The book will be finished tomorrow, as agreed. It would have been ready sooner, but the leather to cover it was full of tears and holes made by thorns, so that held us up, and the paper wasn't as good as it might have been either.'

'Yes, yes, very well, the librarian has passed your complaints on!' The Adderhead's voice sounded as if he had been shouting himself hoarse. 'If Taddeo had his way, you'd spend the rest of your life in this room, rebinding *all* my books. But I will let you go – you, your daughter, your wife, and those good-for-nothing strolling players. They can all go – I just want the book! Mortola has told me about the three words that your daughter so cunningly failed to mention, but never mind that – I shall take good care that no one writes them in its pages! I want to be able to laugh in the Cold Man's face at last – laugh at him

and his pale women! Another night like this and I shall be beating my head against the wall, I shall kill my wife, I shall kill my child, I shall kill all of you. Do you understand, Bluejay or whatever your name is? You must finish the book before dark falls again! You must!’

Mo stroked the wooden boards that he had covered with leather only the day before. ‘I’ll be finished by the time the sun rises. But you must swear to me on your son’s life that then you will let us go at once.’

The Adderhead looked at him as if the White Women were there standing behind him. ‘Yes, yes, I swear by whoever and whatever you like! By sunrise, that sounds good!’ He walked ponderously over to Mo and stared at his chest. ‘Show me!’ he whispered. ‘Show me where Mortola wounded you. With the magic weapon that my master-at-arms took apart so thoroughly that now no one can put it together again. I had the fool hanged for that.’

Mo hesitated, but finally he opened his shirt.

‘So close to the heart!’ The Adderhead put his hand on Mo’s chest as if to make sure that the heart in it was really still beating. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes, you must indeed know a way to cheat death or you wouldn’t be alive now.’

He turned abruptly and waved the two servants over to the door. ‘Very well – I shall have you fetched soon after sunrise, you and the book,’ he said over his shoulder.

‘Now get me something to eat in the hall!’ Meggie heard him shouting outside the door as the guards bolted it again. ‘Wake the cooks, wake the maids and the Piper. Wake them all! I want to eat, and listen to a few dark songs. And the Piper must sing them so loudly that I don’t hear the child crying.’

Then his footsteps retreated, and only the rolling of the thunder remained. A flash of lightning made the pages of the almost-finished book shine as if they had a life of their own. Mo

had gone over to the window. He stood there motionless, looking out.

‘By sunrise! Can you do it?’ asked Meggie anxiously.

‘Of course,’ he said, without turning. Lightning was flickering over the sea like a distant light being switched on and off by someone – except that no such light existed in this world. Meggie went over to Mo, and he put his arm round her. He knew she was afraid of thunderstorms. When she was very small and had crept into bed with him, he always told her the same story: thunderstorms were because the sky longed to be united with the earth, and reached out fiery fingers to touch it on such nights.

But Mo didn’t tell that story today.

‘Did you see the fear in his face?’ Meggie whispered to him. ‘Exactly as Fenoglio described it.’

‘Yes, even the Adderhead must play the part that Fenoglio has written for him,’ replied Mo. ‘But so must we, Meggie. How do you like that idea?’

The Night Before

True, I talk of dreams,
Which are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy,
Which is as thin of substance as the air.

William Shakespeare,
Romeo and Juliet

It was the last night before the day when the Adderhead would show his clemency. In a few hours, just before dawn, they would all be in position by the road. None of the informers had been able to say exactly when the prisoners were to come down it – they knew only that this would be the day. The robbers were sitting together, telling each other tales of old adventures in loud voices. Presumably that was their means of keeping fear at bay, but Dustfinger did not feel like either talking or listening. He kept waking suddenly from sleep, but not because of the voices that came to his ears. Pictures in his mind woke him, terrible pictures that had been robbing him of sleep for days.

This time they had been particularly bad, and so real that he started up as if Gwin had jumped on his chest. His heart was still thudding hard as he sat there staring into the dark. Dreams – in the other world they had often kept him from sleeping too,

but he couldn't remember any of them as bad as this one. 'It's the dead. They bring bad dreams,' Farid always said. 'They whisper terrible things to you, and then they lie on your breast to feel your racing heart. It makes them feel alive again!'

Dustfinger liked this explanation. He feared death, but not the dead. But suppose it was quite different; suppose the dreams were showing him a story already waiting for him somewhere? Reality was a fragile thing; Silvertongue's voice had shown him that once and for all.

Roxane stirred in her sleep beside him. She turned her head and murmured the names of her children, the dead as well as the living. There was still no news from Ombra. Even the Black Prince had heard nothing for a long time, either from the castle or the city, no word of what had happened after the Adderhead sent Cosimo's body back to his daughter, with the news that hardly any of the men who had followed him would come back either.

Roxane whispered Brianna's name again. Every day she stayed here with him cut her to the heart, Dustfinger knew that only too well. So why didn't he simply go back with her? Why not turn his back on this infernal hill, and return at last to a place where you didn't have to hide underground like an animal? Or like a dead man, he added in his thoughts.

You know why, he told himself. It's the dreams. The accursed dreams. He whispered fire-words to banish the darkness in which dreams put forth such dreadful blossoms. A flame licked up sleepily from the ground beside him. He held out his hand and let it dance up his arm, lick his fingers and his forehead, in the hope that it would simply burn the horrible pictures away. But even the pain did not rid him of them, and Dustfinger extinguished the flame with the flat of his hand. His skin was sooty and hot afterwards, as if the fire had left its black breath behind, but the dream was still there, a terror in his heart, too black and strong even for the fire.

How could he simply go away when he saw such images by night – pictures of the dead, again and again, nothing but blood and death? The faces changed. Sometimes it was Resa's face he saw, sometimes Meggie's, then at other times the face of the Barn Owl. He had seen the Black Prince too, with blood on his breast. And today – today it had been Farid's face. Just like the night before. Dustfinger closed his eyes when the pictures came back, so plain and clear ... Of course he had tried to persuade the boy to stay with Roxane tomorrow, when he set off with the robbers – along the road they were to come down, Resa and Silvertongue, Meggie, the Barn Owl and all the others. (Just how many there would be, even the Prince's informers could not say.) But it was hopeless.

Dustfinger leaned back against the damp stone into which hands long gone had cut the narrow galleries, and looked at the boy. Farid had curled up like a small child, knees drawn up against his chest, with the two martens beside him. They slept at Farid's side more and more often when they came back from hunting, perhaps because they knew that Roxane did not like them.

How peacefully the boy lay there, not at all as Dustfinger had just seen him in his dreams. A smile even flickered across his face. Perhaps he was dreaming of Meggie, Resa's Meggie, as like her mother as one flame is like another, and yet so different. 'You do think she's all right, don't you?' Farid asked that question heaven knows how many times a day. Dustfinger still clearly remembered the feeling of being in love for the first time. How vulnerable his heart had suddenly been! Such a trembling, quivering thing, happy and miserably unhappy at once.

A cold wind blew through the galleries, and Dustfinger saw the boy shivering in his sleep. Gwin raised his head when he rose and took the cloak off his shoulders, covering Farid with it. 'Why are you looking at me like that?' he whispered to the

marten. 'He's crept into your heart just as he crept into mine. How could it happen to us, Gwin?'

The marten licked his paw and looked at him from dark eyes. When he dreamed it was surely only of hunting, not of dead boys.

Suppose the old man was sending the dreams? The idea made Dustfinger shudder as he lay down beside Roxane on the hard ground again. Yes, Fenoglio could be sitting in some corner, as he had often done these last few days, spinning bad dreams for him. That was exactly what he had done with the Adderhead's fears! Nonsense, thought Dustfinger angrily, putting his arm round Roxane. Meggie isn't here. Without her, the old man's words are nothing but ink. Now try to get some sleep, or you'll be nodding off as you wait among the trees with the others tomorrow.

But it was a long time before he could close his eyes.

He just lay there and listened to the boy's breathing.

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The Pen and the Sword

‘Of course not,’ said Hermione. ‘Everything we need is here on this paper.’

J.K. Rowling,
Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone

Mo worked all night, while the storm raged outside as if Fenoglio’s world could not accept that soon immortality would arrive in it. Meggie had tried to stay awake, but finally she had nodded off again, head on the table, and he had put her to bed as he had done so many times before. Marvelling yet again to see how big she was now. Almost grown up. Almost.

Meggie woke as he snapped the clasps shut. ‘Good morning,’ he said as she raised her head from the pillow – and hoped it would really be a good morning. Outside, the sky was turning red like a face with the blood streaming back into it. The clasps held well. Mo had filed them so that no part of them pricked or dug into the fingers. They held the blank pages together as firmly as if Death were already between them. The leather he had been given for the binding had a reddish tinge, and it surrounded the wooden boards of the covers like their natural skin. The back was gently rounded, the stitching firm, the quires carefully planed. But the fact was that none of that mattered with this book. No one would read it. No one would

keep it beside his bed to leaf through its pages again and again. The book was eerie for all its beauty, even Mo felt that, although it was the work of his own hands. It seemed to have a voice that whispered barely perceptible words, words that were not to be found on its blank pages. But they existed. Fenoglio had written them, in a place far away, where women and children now wept for their dead husbands and fathers. Yes, the clasps were important.

Heavy footsteps echoed along the corridor outside the door. Soldiers' footsteps. They came closer and closer. Outside, the night was fading. The Adderhead was taking Mo at his word. *By the time the sun rises ...*

Meggie quickly got out of bed, passed her hand over her hair and smoothed down her creased dress.

'Is it finished?' she whispered.

He nodded, and took the book from the table. 'Do you think the Adderhead will like it?'

The Piper opened the door, with four men following him. His silver nose sat on his face as if it had grown from the flesh.

'Well, Bluejay? Have you finished?'

Mo inspected the book from all sides. 'Yes, I think so,' he said, but when the Piper put his hand out he hid it behind his back. 'Oh no,' he said. 'I'm keeping this until your master has kept his side of the bargain.'

'You are?' The Piper smiled in derision. 'Don't you think I know ways of taking it from you? But hold on to it for a while. Fear will make you weak at the knees soon enough.'

It was a long way from the part of the Castle of Night where the ghosts of forgotten women lived to the halls where the Adderhead held court. The Piper walked behind Mo all the way with his curiously arrogant gait, stiff as a stork, so close behind that Mo felt his breath on the nape of his neck. Mo had never been in most of the corridors along which they marched, yet he

felt as if he had walked down them all before – in the days when he read Fenoglio's book over and over again as he tried to bring Resa back. It was a strange feeling to be here himself, behind the words on the page – and looking for her again.

He had read about the hall whose mighty doors opened for them, too, and when he saw Meggie's look of alarm he knew only too well what other dreadful place it reminded them both of. Capricorn's red church had not been half as magnificent as the Adderhead's throne-room, but thanks to Fenoglio's description Mo had recognized the model at once. Red-washed walls, column ranged beside column on both sides, except that unlike those in Capricorn's church, these were faced with scales of silver. Capricorn had even taken the idea of a statue from the Adderhead, but the sculptor who immortalised the Silver Prince clearly knew his trade better.

Capricorn had not tried to imitate the Adderhead's throne. It was in the shape of a nest of silver vipers, two of them rearing up with their mouths fixed and wide open, so that the Adderhead's hands could rest on their heads. The lord of the Castle of Night was magnificently clad, despite the early hour, as if to welcome his immortality with due honour. He wore a cape of silvery-white heron feathers over garments of black silk. Behind him, like a flock of birds with bright plumage, stood his court: administrators, ladies' maids, servants – and among them, dressed in the ashen grey of their guild, a number of physicians.

Mortola was there too, of course. She stood in the background, almost invisible in her black dress. If Mo had not been looking out for her he would have missed her. There was no sign of Basta, but Firefox was standing next to the throne, arms crossed under his fox-fur cloak. He was staring their way with hostility, but to Mo's surprise his dark looks were aimed not at him, but mainly at the Piper.

It's a game, thought Mo as he walked past the silver columns. *Fenoglio's game*. If only it hadn't felt so real. How quiet it was in

the red hall, in spite of all the people. Meggie looked at him, her face so pale under her fair hair, and he gave her the most encouraging smile his lips could manage – feeling thankful that she couldn't hear how fast his heart was beating.

The Adderhead's wife sat beside him. Meggie had described her perfectly: an ivory porcelain doll. Behind them stood the nurse with the eagerly awaited son. Mo had never wanted a son, only a daughter. Resa had teased him about it when they didn't yet know what their baby would be. The child's crying sounded strangely lost in the great hall. Even the rain beating against glazed windows high above them drowned out the shrill little voice.

It's a game, thought Mo once more when he was standing before the steps of the throne, *only a game*. If only he'd known more about the rules. There was someone else present whom they knew. Taddeo the librarian, head humbly bent, stood right behind the Adderhead's throne, and gave him an anxious smile.

The Adderhead looked even more exhausted for lack of sleep than he had on their last meeting. His face was blotched and full of shadows, his lips colourless. Only the rubies in the corners of his nostrils shone red. Who could say how many sleepless nights he had spent? For a moment it seemed to Mo as if all his life had gone into the rubies at the corners of his nose.

'Good, so you have really finished,' he said. 'Of course, you're in a hurry to see your wife again, I'm sure. I've been told she asks about you every day. That's love, I expect, isn't it?'

A game, only a game ... it didn't feel like that. Nothing had ever seemed more real than the hatred that Mo felt at this moment, as he looked at that coarse and arrogant face. And he felt something else beating in his breast again: his new, cold heart. Or was it just his old heart, burned out with hatred?

The Adderhead made a sign to the Piper, and the silver-nosed man stepped commandingly towards Mo. He found it hard to put the book into the man's gloved hands. After all, there was

nothing else that could save them now. The Piper noticed his reluctance, smiled scornfully at him – and took the book up the steps to his master. Then, with a brief glance at Firefox, he stationed himself right beside the throne with an arrogant air, as if there were no more important man in the hall.

‘Beautiful. Beautiful indeed!’ The Adderhead caressed the white pages of the book. ‘Whether or not he’s a robber, he knows something about bookbinding, don’t you agree, Firefox?’

‘There are men of many trades among the robbers,’ was all that Firefox replied. ‘Why not an accursed bookbinder too?’

‘How true, how true. Did you all hear that?’ The Adderhead looked at his colourfully clad retinue, inviting approval. ‘It seems to me that my herald still thinks I’d have let a little girl trick me. Yes, he believes I’m a credulous fool by comparison with his old master Capricorn.’

Firefox was about to protest, but the Adderhead silenced him with a gesture. ‘Do not speak!’ was all he said, loud enough for everyone to hear. ‘In spite of my very obvious folly, I have thought of a way to prove which of the two of us is wrong.’ With a nod of the head, he summoned Taddeo to his side. Eager to oblige, the librarian approached him, taking pen and ink from the folds of his flowing robe.

‘It’s perfectly simple, Firefox!’ You could tell that the Adderhead liked the sound of his own voice. ‘You, and not I, will be the first to write your name in this book! Taddeo here has assured me that the letters can be removed again with a scraper that Balbulus once designed specially for that purpose, leaving no trace. No one will be able to see even a shadow of your writing on the pages. So you write your name – which I know you are able to do – we give the Bluejay a sword, and he runs it through your body. Isn’t that a fabulous idea? Won’t it prove beyond doubt whether or not this book can do what his daughter promised me?’

A game. Mo saw fear spread over Firefox’s face like a rash.

‘Well, come along!’ the Adderhead derided him, opening the book and leafing through the blank pages, as if lost in thought. ‘Why do you suddenly look so pale? Isn’t such a game precisely to your taste? Come along, write your name in it. Not the name you’ve given yourself, but the one you were born with.’

Think. Mo saw one of the guards surrounding him and Meggie draw his sword. *What are you going to do? What?* He felt Meggie’s horrified gaze, felt her fear like a chill beside him.

Firefox looked round as if searching for a face that might offer help, but no one stepped forward, not even Mortola. She stood there with her lips compressed so tightly that they were almost white, and if her glance could have killed as her poisons often did, the book would not have helped the Adderhead. As it was, however, he just smiled at her, and put the pen in his herald’s hand. Firefox stared at the sharpened quill as if he were not sure what to do with it. Then he dipped it ceremoniously in the ink – and wrote.

‘Excellent!’ The Piper took the book from his hand the moment he had finished. The Adderhead waved to one of the servants waiting with dishes full of fruit and cakes at the foot of the silver columns. ‘Well, what are you waiting for, Firefox? Try your luck!’ Honey dripped from his fingers as he pushed one of the cakes between his lips.

Firefox, however, stood there, still staring at the Piper, whose long arms were wound round the book as if he were holding a baby. He responded to Firefox’s glance with a nasty smile. Firefox abruptly turned his back to him and the Adderhead, and came down the steps.

Mo removed Meggie’s hand from his arm and pushed her gently aside, although she resisted. The men-at-arms standing around retreated, with incredulity on their faces, as if clearing a stage. Except for the one who had drawn his sword and now held it out to Mo. Was this still Fenoglio’s game? It would be like him. When Mo had entered the hall just now he’d have

given one of his eyes for a sword, but he didn't want this one. He wanted it as little as the roles some other people wanted him to play, whether Fenoglio or the Adderhead. He had always hated games like this, games played by the strong with someone weaker, the cat with the helpless mouse ... he hated them, even when the mouse was a murderer and fire-raiser.

When Firefox stopped at the foot of the steps, hesitating as if he were wondering whether there might not be some way out for him after all, one of the men-at-arms went up to him and took his sword from its sheath.

'Here, Bluejay, take it.' The soldier who was holding his sword out to Mo was getting impatient, and Mo remembered the night when he had picked up Basta's sword and chased him and Capricorn out of his house. He still remembered just how heavy the weapon had felt in his hand, how the bright blade caught the light ...

'No, thank you,' he said, stepping back. 'Swords are not among the tools of my trade. I thought I'd proved that with the book.'

The Adderhead wiped the honey off his fingers, removed a few cake crumbs from his lips, and looked him up and down. 'Oh, come on, Bluejay!' he said in a tone of mild surprise. 'You heard. We don't expect any great skill in swordplay. All you have to do is run it through his body. It really isn't difficult!'

Firefox was staring at Mo. His eyes were clouded with hatred. Look at him, you fool, Mo told himself. He'd run you through with that sword on the spot, so why don't you do it to him? Meggie understood why not. He saw it in her eyes. Perhaps the Bluejay might take that sword, but not her father.

'Forget it, Adder,' he said out loud. 'If you have an account to settle with your bloodhound, see to it yourself. Ours is a different agreement.'

The Adderhead looked at him with as much interest as if some exotic animal had wandered into his hall. Then he

laughed. 'I like your answer!' he cried. 'Indeed I do. And do you know something? It finally shows me I've caught the right man. You are the Bluejay, without any doubt. He's said to be a sly fox. But all the same I'll keep my bargain.'

And so saying, he nodded to the man-at-arms who was still offering Mo the sword. Without hesitation, the man turned and thrust the long blade through the body of his master's herald, so fast that Firefox did not even manage to flinch back.

Meggie screamed. Mo drew her close and hid her face against his chest. But Firefox stood there, staring in bewilderment at the sword sticking out of his body as if it were a part of him.

With a self-satisfied smile, the Adderhead looked around, enjoying the silent horror in the hall around him. Firefox took the sword sticking out of his body and pulled the blade out very slowly, his face distorted, but without swaying on his feet. And the great hall became as still as if all present had stopped breathing.

As for the Adderhead, he applauded. 'Well, look at that!' he cried. 'Is there anyone here in this hall who thinks he could have survived that swordstroke? He's just a little pale, that's all – am I right, Firefox?'

His herald did not reply, but just stood there staring at the blood-stained sword in his hands.

But the Adderhead went on, in a voice of high good humour, 'Well, I think that proves it! The girl wasn't lying, and the Adderhead is not a gullible fool who fell for a child's fairy-tale, is he?'

He placed his words as carefully as a beast of prey places its paws. Nothing but silence answered him. Even Firefox, his face white with pain, said not a word as he wiped his own blood from the swordblade.

'Excellent!' remarked the Adderhead. 'That's done, then – and now I have an immortal herald. It's time I was able to say the same of myself. Piper,' he said, turning to the man with the

silver nose. 'Empty the hall for me. Get everyone out – servants, women, physicians, clerks, all of them. I want just ten men-at-arms to stay, the librarian, you and Firefox, and the two prisoners. You go away too!' he snapped at Mortola, who was about to protest. 'Stay with my wife and get that baby to stop crying at last.'

'What's he going to do, Mo?' whispered Meggie as the hall emptied around them. But he could only shake his head. He didn't know either. He only felt that the game was far from over yet.

'What about us?' he called to the Adderhead. 'My daughter and I have fulfilled our part of the bargain, so fetch the prisoners from your dungeons and let us go.'

But the Adderhead only raised his hands in a conciliatory gesture. 'Yes, of course, of course, Bluejay,' he graciously replied. 'As you have kept your word, I keep mine. The Adder's word of honour. I've already sent men down to the dungeons, but it's a long way from there to the gate, so give us the pleasure of your company a little longer. Believe me, we shall provide you with entertainment.'

A game. Mo looked round and saw the huge doors close behind the last servants. Once empty, the hall only seemed larger.

'Well, how are you doing, Firefox?' The Adderhead ran a cool eye over his herald. 'What does it feel like to be immortal? Fabulous? Reassuring?'

Firefox said nothing. He was still holding the sword which had run him through. 'I'd like my own sword back,' he said hoarsely, without taking his eyes off his master. 'This one is no good.'

'Nonsense. I'll have a new sword forged for you, a better one, in gratitude for the service you've done me today!' replied the Adderhead. 'But first we have one small thing to do so that we can remove your name from my book without any damage.'

‘Remove it?’ Firefox’s eyes wandered to the Piper, who opened the book again and held it out to the librarian.

‘Remove it, yes. You remember that originally the book was to make *me* immortal, not you, and for that to happen the scribe must write three more words in it.’

‘What for?’ Firefox wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve.

Three words. Poor devil. Did he hear the trap snapping shut? Meggie reached for Mo’s hand.

‘To make room, one might say. To make room for me,’ replied the Adderhead. ‘And do you know what?’ he went on, as Firefox looked at him uncomprehendingly. ‘As a reward for your unselfish proof of how reliably this book really does protect one from death, as soon as the scribe has written those three words you may kill the Bluejay. If he can be killed, that is. Well, is it a fair offer?’

‘What? What are you talking about?’ Meggie’s voice was shrill with fear, but Mo quickly put his hand over her mouth. ‘Meggie, please!’ he said, low-voiced. ‘Have you forgotten what you said about Fenoglio’s words? Nothing will happen to me. Do you hear me?’

But she wouldn’t listen. She sobbed and held him tightly until two men-at-arms roughly dragged her away.

‘Three words!’ Firefox was advancing on him. And hadn’t he just been feeling sorry for him? You’re a fool, Mortimer, thought Mo.

‘Three words! Count them well, Bluejay!’ said Firefox, raising his sword. ‘On four I shall strike, and it will hurt, I promise you, even if it may not kill you. I know what I’m talking about.’

The sword blade shone like ice in the candlelight. It looked long enough to run three men through at once, and here and there Firefox’s blood still clung to the bright metal like rust.

‘Come now, Taddeo,’ said the Adderhead. ‘You remember the words I told you? Write them one by one, but don’t say them aloud. Just count them for us.’

The Piper opened the book and held it out to the old man. With trembling fingers, Taddeo dipped his pen in the jar of ink. ‘One,’ he whispered, and the pen scratched over the parchment.

‘Two.’

Firefox, smiling, set the point of the sword against Mo’s chest.

Taddeo raised his head, dipped his pen in the ink again and looked uncertainly at the Adderhead.

‘Have you forgotten how to count, old man?’ he asked.

Taddeo just shook his head and lowered the pen to the paper again. ‘Three!’ he whispered.

Mo heard Meggie call his name, and stared at the point of the sword. Words, nothing but words protected him from that sharp, bright blade ...

In Fenoglio’s world, words were enough.

Firefox’s eyes widened in mingled astonishment and horror. Mo saw him try with his last breath to thrust the sword into him, to take him to wherever pen and ink were sending him, too, but the sword dropped from his hands. Firefox collapsed like a bundle of empty clothes, and fell at Mo’s feet.

The Piper stood there staring down at the dead man in silence, while Taddeo lowered his pen and retreated from the book in which he had just been writing as if it might kill him as well, with a quiet voice, with a single word.

‘Take him away,’ ordered the Adderhead. ‘Before the White Women come to fetch him from my castle. Get on with it!’

Three men-at-arms carried Firefox out. The foxtails on his cloak dragged on the tiles as they hauled him away, and Mo stood there staring at the sword lying at his feet. He felt Meggie put her arms around him. Her heart was beating like a frightened bird’s.

‘Who wants an immortal herald?’ remarked the Adderhead as the dead Firefox was removed. ‘If you’d been a little cleverer you’d have seen that for yourself.’ The jewels that adorned his nostrils looked more than ever like drops of blood.

‘Shall I remove his name, Your Grace?’ Taddeo’s voice was so hesitant that it was barely audible.

‘Of course. His name and the three words, you understand. And do a thorough job of it. I want the pages white as newly fallen snow again.’

The librarian obediently set to work. The scraping sound was curiously loud in the empty hall. When Taddeo had finished, he passed the flat of his hand over the parchment, which was blank again now. Then the Piper took the book from his hands and offered it to the Adderhead.

Mo saw the man’s stout fingers shaking as they dipped the pen in the ink. And before he began to write, the Adderhead looked up once more. ‘I am sure you weren’t stupid enough to bind any kind of extra magic into this book, were you, Bluejay?’ he asked warily. ‘There are ways of killing a man – and not just a man, but his wife and daughter too – that make dying a very long and very painful business. It can take days – many days and many nights.’

‘Magic? No,’ replied Mo, still staring at the sword at his feet. ‘I don’t know anything about magic. Let me say it again: bookbinding, and nothing else, is my trade. And all I know about it has gone into that book. No more and no less.’

‘Very well.’ The Adderhead dipped the pen in the ink again – and stopped once more. ‘White,’ he murmured, staring at the blank pages. ‘See how white they are. White as the women who bring death, white as the bones the Cold Man leaves behind when he’s had his fill of flesh and blood.’

Then he wrote. Wrote his name in the blank book, and closed it. ‘That’s done!’ he cried triumphantly. ‘That’s done, Taddeo! Lock him in the book, the soul-swallower, the enemy who can’t

be killed. Now he can't kill me either. Now we're equals. Two Cold Men ruling the world together, for all eternity.'

The librarian obeyed, but as he was engaging the clasps he looked at Mo. *Who are you?* his eyes seemed to ask. *What's your part in this game?* But even if Mo had wanted to, he couldn't have given him the answer.

The Adderhead, however, seemed to think he knew it. 'You know, I like you, Bluejay,' he said, never taking his lizard-like gaze off Mo. 'Yes, you'd make a good herald, but that's not the way the parts are shared out, is it?'

'No, indeed not,' said Mo. But you don't know who shares them out, and I do, he added in his thoughts.

The Adderhead nodded to the men-at-arms. 'Let him go,' he ordered. 'And the girl, and anyone else he wants to take.'

They stepped aside, if reluctantly.

'Come on, Mo!' whispered Meggie, pressing his hand.

How pale she was. Pale with fear, and so defenceless. Mo looked past the men-at-arms, and thought of the walled courtyard waiting for them out there, the silver vipers staring down, the openings for boiling pitch above the gate. He thought of the crossbows of the guards on the battlements too, the spears of the guards at the gate – and the soldiers who had pushed Resa down in the dirt. Without a word, he bent down and picked up the sword that had fallen from Firefox's hand.

'Mo!' Meggie let go of his hand and looked at him in horror. 'What are you doing?'

But he just pulled her close to him without a word, while the men-at-arms all drew their weapons. Firefox's sword weighed heavy, heavier than the one he had used to chase Capricorn out of his house.

'Well, fancy that!' said the Adderhead. 'You don't seem to trust my word, Bluejay!'

‘Oh, I trust it,’ said Mo, without lowering the sword. ‘But everyone here except me has a weapon, so I think I’ll keep this masterless sword. You keep the book, and if we’re both lucky we’ll never see each other again after this morning.’

Even the Adderhead’s laughter sounded as if it were made of silver – dark, tarnished silver. ‘Well, now,’ he said. ‘It’s a pleasure to play games with you, Bluejay. You’re a good opponent. Which is why I’ll keep my word. Let him go,’ he told the men-at-arms again. ‘Tell the guards at the gate the Adderhead is letting the Bluejay go because he need never fear him again. For the Adderhead is immortal!’

The words echoed in Mo’s ears as he took Meggie’s hand. Taddeo was still holding the book, holding it as if it might bite him. Mo thought he could still feel its paper between his fingers, the wood of the boards, the leather covering it, the thread stitching the pages. Then he saw Meggie’s gaze. She was staring at the sword in his hand as if it made a stranger of him.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s join your mother!’

‘Yes, go, Bluejay, take your daughter and your wife and all the others,’ the Adderhead called after them. ‘Before Mortola reminds me how stupid it is to let you go free!’

Only two men-at-arms followed them on their long journey through the castle. The courtyard was almost empty at this early hour of the morning. The sky above the Castle of Night was grey, and fine rain was falling like a veil before the face of the dawning day. The few servants already at work retreated in alarm from the sight of the sword in Mo’s hand, and the men-at-arms waved them aside without a word.

The other prisoners were already waiting at the gate, a forlorn little troop guarded by a dozen soldiers. At first Mo couldn’t see Resa, but suddenly one figure moved away from the others and ran towards him and Meggie. No one stopped her. Perhaps the soldiers had heard of Firefox’s fate. Mo felt their eyes on him, full of horror and fear – the man who bound

Death between white pages, and was a robber into the bargain! Didn't the sword in his hand prove that for all time? He didn't care what they thought. Let them be afraid of him. He had felt more than enough fear for one lifetime in all those days and nights when he thought he had lost everything – his wife, his daughter – and there was nothing left for him but a lonely death in this world made of words.

Resa hugged him and Meggie in turn; she almost crushed them, and his face was wet with her tears when she let go of him again.

'Come on, let's go through the gate, Resa!' he urged in a low voice. 'Before the lord of this castle changes his mind! We all have a great deal to tell each other, but for now let's go!'

The other prisoners joined them in silence. They watched incredulously as the gate opened for them, as its iron-bound wings swung open and let them go free. Some of them stumbled over their own feet in their haste as they crowded out. But still no one from the castle followed them. The guards just stood there, swords and spears in their hands, staring as the prisoners stumbled uncertainly away, their legs stiff from weeks in the dungeons. Only one man-at-arms came out of the gate with them, wordlessly indicating the path they should take. Suppose they shoot at us from the battlements? Mo thought, when he saw that there was not a single tree or bush to give them cover as they followed the road down the bare slope. He felt like a fly on the wall ready to be swatted. But nothing happened. They walked through the grey morning, through the rain now pouring down, with the castle crouched menacingly behind them like a monster – and nothing happened.

'He's keeping his promise!' Mo heard the others whispering these words more and more often. 'The Adderhead is keeping his word.' Resa asked anxiously about his wound, and he replied quietly that he was all right, while he waited to hear footsteps behind them, soldiers' footsteps. But all was still. It seemed as if they had been going down the bare hillside for an

eternity when trees suddenly appeared in front of them. The shade that their branches cast on the road was as dark as if night itself had taken refuge under them.

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Only a Dream

One day a young man said, 'This tale about everybody having to die doesn't sit too well with me. I will go in search of the land where one never dies.'

Italo Calvino, tr. George Martin,
'The Land Where One Never Dies',
Italian Folktales

Dustfinger was lying among the trees, drenched to the skin by the rain, with Farid beside him. The boy's black hair clung to his forehead, and he kept shivering. The others were certainly in no better shape. They had been waiting for hours; they'd taken up their positions before sunrise, and it had been raining ever since. It was dark under the trees, as dark as if day had never dawned. And quiet, as quiet as if the waiting men were not alone in holding their breath. Only the noise of the rain splashed and dripped on to the trees and branches, falling and falling. Farid wiped his wet nose on his sleeve, and someone sneezed somewhere. Stupid fool, hold your nose, thought Dustfinger – then started when he heard something rustling on the other side of the road. But it was only a rabbit scuttling out of the thickets. It stopped in the middle of the road, sniffing the air, ears twitching, eyes wide open. It's probably not half as scared as I am, thought Dustfinger, wishing

himself back with Roxane in the dark underground galleries of the mine. They smelled like a crypt, but at least they were dry.

He was pushing his dripping hair back from his forehead for about the hundredth time when Farid, beside him, suddenly raised his head. The rabbit raced away among the trees, and footsteps sounded through the rushing of the rain. Here they came at last, a forlorn little troop, almost as wet as the robbers waiting for them. Farid was going to jump up, but Dustfinger seized him and pulled him roughly back to his side. 'Stay where you are, understand?' he hissed. 'I didn't leave the martens with Roxane only to have to catch you instead!'

Silvertongue led the way, with Meggie and Resa behind him. He was holding a sword in his hand, as he had on the night when he turned Capricorn and Basta out of his house. The pregnant woman he had seen in the dungeon was stumbling down the road beside Resa. She kept looking back, up to the Castle of Night, which still towered menacing and huge behind them, even though it was so far away now. There were more prisoners than he had seen at the inn in the forest. Obviously the Adderhead really had emptied his dungeons. Some were swaying as if they could hardly keep on their feet, others blinking as if even the dim light of this dark day was too much for their eyes. Silvertongue seemed to be all right, in spite of his blood-stained shirt, and Resa did not look quite as pale as in the dungeon, but perhaps that was just his imagination.

He had just seen the Barn Owl among the others – how old and fragile he looked! – when Farid clutched his arm in sudden fright and pointed at the men who had appeared on the road. They emerged so soundlessly that they might have been growing out of the rain, more and more of them, and at first Dustfinger thought the Black Prince had managed to get reinforcements after all. But then he saw Basta.

He was holding a sword in one hand and a knife in the other, and blood lust was written all over his scorched face. None of the men with him wore the Adderhead's coat of arms, but that

meant nothing. Perhaps Mortola had sent them, perhaps the Adderhead wanted to be able to protest innocence when his prisoners were found dead in the road. There were a great many men; that was all that mattered. Dozens and dozens of them. Far more than the robbers lying in wait in the trees with the Black Prince. Basta raised a hand, smiling, and they advanced down the road with drawn swords, going at a comfortable pace as if they wanted to enjoy the fear on the prisoners' faces for a while before they struck.

The Black Prince was the first to leap out of the trees, with the bear at his side. The two of them took up their position in the road as if they alone could stop the slaughter. But his men were quick to follow, silently forming a wall of bodies between the prisoners and the men who had come to kill them. Cursing quietly, Dustfinger rose to his feet too. This was going to be a morning of bloodshed. The rain wouldn't fall fast enough to wash all the blood away, and he would have to provoke the fire to great anger, for it didn't like rain. Damp made it sleepy – and it would have to bite hard, very hard.

'Farid!' He breathed the boy's name, and was just in time to haul him back by the arm. He wanted to go to Meggie, of course, but he would have to take fire with him. They would need to make a circle of it – a ring of flames around those who had nothing but their hands against all those swords. He picked up a strong branch, enticed fire from its damp bark – hissing, steaming fire – and threw the burning wood to the boy. The barrier of human flesh wouldn't hold for long; it was fire that must save them.

Basta's voice came through the gloom, derisive, bloodthirsty, while Farid made sparks rain down the ground. He scattered them over the wet earth like a farmer sowing his seed, while Dustfinger followed him and made them grow. The flames were flaring up as Basta's men attacked. Sword clashed against sword, screams filled the air, bodies collided as Dustfinger and Farid lured fire into being and nursed it until it almost

surrounded the company of prisoners. Dustfinger left only a narrow path free, a way of escape into the forest in case the flames stopped obeying even him and their anger finally made them bite everyone, friend and foe alike.

He saw Resa's face and the fear in it; he saw Farid leap over the flames to join the freed prisoners, in line with their plan. A good thing Meggie was there, or very likely Farid would not have left his side. Dustfinger himself still stood outside the fire. He drew his knife – it was always better to have a knife in your hand when Basta was around – and whispered to the fire, insistently, almost lovingly, to keep it from doing what it wanted and becoming an enemy instead of a friend. As the robbers were forced further and further back, they came closer and closer to the troop of freed prisoners. Among them all, only Silvertongue had a weapon.

Three of Basta's men were attacking the Prince, but the bear was protecting his master with teeth and claws. Dustfinger felt almost sick at the sight of the wounds those black paws inflicted. The fire crackled at him, wanted to play, wanted to dance, didn't understand anything about the fear all around, neither smelled nor tasted it. Dustfinger heard cries, one as clear as a boy's voice. He pushed his way through the fighting bodies – and picked up a sword lying in the mud. Where was Farid?

There, thrusting about him with his knife, swift as an adder striking. Dustfinger seized his arm, hissing at the flames to let them pass, and dragged him away. 'Damn it all! I ought to have left you with Roxane,' he shouted as he pushed Farid through the fire. 'Didn't I tell you to stay with Meggie?' He could have wrung the boy's thin neck, but he was so relieved to see him uninjured.

Meggie ran to Farid and took his hand. They stood there side by side, staring at the blood and the turmoil, but Dustfinger tried to hear nothing, see nothing. The fire alone was his concern. The rest was up to the Prince.

Silvertongue was striking out well with his sword, far better than Dustfinger himself could have managed, but his face looked exhausted and wet with rain. Dustfinger glanced at Resa. She was standing beside Meggie, and she was still unhurt. For now. The damned rain was running down his face and the back of his neck, drowning out his voice with its rushing. The water was singing a lullaby to the flames, an ancient lullaby, and Dustfinger raised his voice, called louder and louder to wake it again, to make it roar and bite. He went very near the ring of fire, saw the fighting men come closer and closer. Some were already almost stumbling into the flames.

Farid too had seen what the rain was doing. He ran nimbly to where the flames were dying down, and Meggie ran after him. A man fell dead in the ring of fire where the boy was standing, extinguishing the flames there with his lifeless body, and a second man stumbled over him. Cursing, Dustfinger made for the deadly breach in the ring, called Silvertongue to help – and saw Basta appear among the flames. Basta, with his face singed and hatred in his eyes – hatred, and fear of the fire. Which would prove stronger? He was staring through the flames, blinking at the smoke, as if in search of one particular face; Dustfinger could well imagine whose. Instinctively, he took a step back. Another man fell dead in the flames; two more, swords drawn, leaped over his body and attacked the prisoners. Screams rang in Dustfinger's ears. He saw Silvertongue place himself in front of Resa, while Basta set a foot on the dead men as if they were a bridge. More flames were needed. Dustfinger was making for the fire, so that it could hear him better at close quarters, but someone seized his arm and swung him round. Twofingers.

'They'll kill us!' he stammered, his eyes wide with fear. 'They were going to kill us all along! And if they don't get us, the flames will burn us alive!'

'Let me go!' Dustfinger shouted at him. The smoke was stinging his eyes and making him cough.

Basta. He was staring at him through the smoke as if an invisible bond united them. The flames licked up at him in vain, and he raised his knife. Who was he aiming at? And why was he smiling like that?

The boy.

Dustfinger pushed the two-fingered man aside. He shouted Farid's name, but the noise all around drowned out his voice. The boy was still holding Meggie's hand with one of his own, while his other held the knife, the knife that Dustfinger had given him in another life, in another story.

'Farid!' The boy did not hear him – and Basta threw.

Dustfinger saw the knife go into that thin back. He caught the boy before he fell to the ground, but he was already dead. And there stood Basta with his foot on another dead body, smiling. Why not? He had hit his target, and it was the target he had been aiming for all along: Dustfinger's heart, his stupid heart. It broke in two as he held Farid in his arms; it simply broke in two, although he had taken such good care of it all these years. He saw Meggie's face, heard her sobbing Farid's name, and put the boy's body into her arms. His legs were trembling so much that he had difficulty in straightening up. Everything about him was trembling, even the hand holding the knife that he had pulled out of the boy's back. He wanted to get at Basta, through the fire and the fighting men, but Silvertongue was faster. Silvertongue, who had plucked Farid from his own story and whose daughter sat there weeping as if her own heart had had a knife driven into it, like the boy ...

Mo ignored the flames moving towards him. He thrust his sword through Basta's body as if he had never done anything else in his life, as if from now on his trade was killing. Basta died with an expression of surprise still on his face. He fell into the fire, and Dustfinger stumbled back to Farid, who was still held in Meggie's arms.

What had he expected – that the boy would come back to life just because his killer was dead? No, the black eyes were still empty, empty as a deserted house. There was none of the joy in them now that had always been so difficult to banish. And Dustfinger knelt there on the trodden earth, while Resa comforted her weeping daughter, and men were fighting, killing and being killed around them, and he no longer had any idea what he was doing here, what was going on, why he had ever come beneath these trees, the same trees that he had seen in his dream.

In the worst of all dreams.

And now it had come true.



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An Exchange

The blue of my eyes was extinguished tonight
The red gold of my heart

Georg Trakl,
'By Night',
Poems

They almost all escaped. The fire saved them, the fury of the bear, the Black Prince's men – and Mo, who practised killing that grey morning as if he meant to become a master of the craft. Basta was left dead under the trees, along with Slasher and so many of their men that the ground was covered with their corpses as if with dead leaves. Two of the strolling players had been killed too – and Farid.

Farid.

Dustfinger himself was pale as death when he carried him back to the mine. Meggie walked beside him all the long, dark way. She held Farid's hand, as if that could help, feeling as sore inside herself as if it would never get better.

She was the only one whom Dustfinger did not send away when he had laid Farid down on his cloak in the most remote of the galleries. No one dared approach him as he bent over the dead boy and wiped the soot from his brow. Roxane did try to talk to him, but when she saw the expression on his face she

left him alone. He allowed only Meggie to sit beside Farid, as if he had seen his own pain in her eyes. So they both sat with him in the depths of Mount Adder, as if they had come to the end of all stories. Without a single word still left to say.

Perhaps night had fallen outside by the time Meggie heard Dustfinger's voice. It came to her as if from far away, through the fog of pain that enveloped her as if she would never find her way out.

'You'd like him back too, wouldn't you?'

It was difficult for her to turn her eyes away from Farid's face. 'He'll never come back,' she whispered, and looked at Dustfinger. She didn't have the strength to speak any louder. All her strength was gone, as if Farid had taken it away with him. He had taken everything away with him.

'There's a story.' Dustfinger looked at his hands, as if what he was talking about was written there. 'A story about the White Women.'

'What kind of story?' Meggie didn't want to hear any more stories ever again. This one had broken her heart for all time. Nonetheless, there was something in Dustfinger's voice ...

He bent over Farid and wiped some soot from his cold forehead. 'Roxane knows it,' he said. 'She'll tell it to you. Just go to her and ... and tell her I've had to go away. Tell her I'm going to find out if the story is true.' He spoke with a strange kind of hesitation, as if it were infinitely difficult to find the right words. 'And remind her of my promise – that I'll always find a way back to her, wherever I am. Will you tell her that?'

What was he talking about? 'Find out?' Meggie's voice was husky with tears. 'Find out what exactly?'

'Oh, people say this and that about the White Women. Much of it's just superstition, but there's sure to be some truth in it somewhere. Stories are always like that, aren't they? No doubt Fenoglio could tell me more, but to be honest I don't want to ask him. I'd rather ask them in person.'

Dustfinger straightened up. He stood there looking around him, as if he had forgotten where he really was.

The White Women. 'They'll be coming soon, won't they?' Meggie asked him anxiously. 'Coming for Farid.'

But Dustfinger shook his head, and for the first time since Farid's death he smiled, that strangely sad smile that Meggie had never seen on any face but his, and that she had never entirely understood. 'No, why should they? They're sure of him already. They come only if you're still clinging to life, if they have to lure you to them with a look or a whispered word. Everything else is superstition. They come while you're still breathing, but very close to death. They come when your heart is beating more and more faintly, when they can smell fear, or blood, as in your father's case. If you die as quickly as Farid you go to them entirely of your own accord.'

Meggie caressed Farid's fingers. They were colder than the stone where she was sitting. 'Then I don't understand,' she whispered. 'If they aren't coming at all, how will you ask them anything?'

'I shall summon them,' replied Dustfinger. 'But you had better not be here when I do it, so will you go to Roxane and tell her what I have said to you?'

She was going to ask more questions, but he put a finger on his lips. 'Please, Meggie!' he said. He didn't often call her by her name. 'Tell Roxane what I have told you – and say ... say I'm sorry. Now, off you go.'

Meggie sensed that he was afraid, but she did not ask him what of, because her heart was asking other questions. How could it be true that Farid was dead, and how would it feel to have him dead in her heart for ever? She caressed his still face one last time before she got to her feet. When she looked back once more at the entrance to the gallery, Dustfinger was looking down at Farid. And, for the first time since she had

known him, his face showed all that he usually hid: affection, love – and pain.

Meggie knew where to look for Roxane, but she lost her way twice in the dark galleries before she finally found her. Roxane was tending the injured women, while the Barn Owl was looking after the men. Many of them had been hurt, and although the fire had saved their lives it had burned many of them badly. Mo was nowhere to be seen, and nor was the Prince; they were probably on guard at the entrance to the mine, but Resa was with Roxane. She was just bandaging an arm that had suffered burns, and Roxane was treating a cut on an old woman's forehead with the same ointment she had once used on Dustfinger's wounds. Its spring-like fragrance did not suit this place.

When Meggie came out of the dark passage Roxane raised her head. Perhaps she had been hoping it was Dustfinger's footsteps that she had heard. Meggie leaned back against the cold wall of the gallery. *This is all a dream*, she thought, *a terrible, terrible dream*. She felt dizzy with weeping.

'What's that story?' she asked Roxane. 'A story about the White Women ... Dustfinger says you're to tell me. And he says he has to go away because he wants to find out if it's true.'

'Go away?' Roxane put the ointment down. 'What are you talking about?'

Meggie wiped her eyes, but there were no tears left in them. She supposed she had used them all up. Where did so many tears come from? 'He says he's going to summon them,' she murmured. 'And he says you're to remember his promise. That he'll always come back, he'll find a way wherever he is ...' The words still made no sense to her when she repeated them. But they obviously meant something to Roxane.

She straightened up, and so did Resa.

'What are you talking about, Meggie?' asked her mother, with concern in her voice. 'Where's Dustfinger?'

‘With Farid. He’s still with Farid.’ It hurt so much to speak his name. Resa took her in her arms. But Roxane just stood there, staring at the dark gallery from which Meggie had come. Then she suddenly pushed Meggie aside, made her way past her and disappeared into the darkness. Resa hurried after her, without letting go of Meggie’s hand. Roxane was only a little way ahead of them. She trod on the hem of her dress, fell over, picked herself up again and ran on. Faster and faster. But still she came too late.

Resa almost stumbled into Roxane, for she was standing rooted to the spot at the entrance of the gallery where Farid lay. Her name burned on the wall in fiery letters, and the White Women were still there. They withdrew their pale hands from Dustfinger’s breast as if they had torn out his heart. Perhaps Roxane was the last thing he saw. Perhaps he just had time to see Farid move before he himself collapsed without a sound, as the White Women vanished.

Yes, Farid was moving – like someone who has slept too long and too deeply. He sat up, his gaze blurred, with no idea who was suddenly lying there motionless behind him. Even when Roxane made her way past him he did not turn. He stared into space, as if there were pictures in front of him that no one else could see.

Hesitantly, as if he were a stranger, Meggie went to him. She didn’t know what to feel. She didn’t know what to think.

But Roxane stood beside Dustfinger, her hand pressed firmly to her mouth, as if she had to hold back her pain. Her name was still burning on the wall of the gallery as if it had stood there for ever, but she took no notice of the letters of fire. Without a word she sank to her knees and took Dustfinger’s head on her lap, as carefully as if she feared to break what was already broken, and she bent over him until her black hair surrounded his face like a veil.

Resa began to weep. But Farid still sat there as if numbed. Only when Meggie was right in front of him did he seem to notice her.

‘Meggie?’ he murmured, his tongue heavy.

It couldn’t be true. He was really back.

Farid. Suddenly his name did not taste of pain. He put his hand out to her and she took it, quickly, as if she had to hold on tight to prevent him from going away again, so far away. Was Dustfinger in that place now? How warm Farid’s face felt again. Her fingers couldn’t believe it. She knelt beside him and put her arms around him, much too tight, felt his heart beating against her, beating strongly.

‘Meggie!’ He looked as relieved as if he had woken from a bad dream. There was even a smile stealing over his lips. But then Roxane, behind them, began sobbing, very quietly, so quietly that you could hardly hear it through her curtain of hair – and Farid turned round.

For a moment he seemed unable to take in what he saw.

Then he tore himself away from Meggie, stood up, stumbled over the cloak as if his legs were still too weak for him to walk. He crawled over to Dustfinger’s side on his knees and touched the still face with incredulous horror.

‘What happened?’ He was shouting at Roxane as if she were the cause of all misfortune. ‘What have you done? What did you do to him?’

Meggie knelt down beside him, trying to soothe him, but he wouldn’t let her. He pushed her hands away and bent over Dustfinger again, putting his ear to his chest, listening – and sobbing as he pressed his face to the place where no heart beat any more.

The Black Prince entered the gallery. Mo was with him, and more and more faces appeared behind them.

‘Go away!’ Farid shouted at them. ‘Go away, all of you! What have you done to him? Why isn’t he breathing? There’s no blood anywhere, no blood at all.’

‘No one did anything to him, Farid!’ whispered Meggie. *You’d like him back too, wouldn’t you?* Meggie heard Dustfinger saying. She kept hearing the words in her head, over and over again. ‘It was the White Women. We saw them. He summoned them himself.’

‘You’re lying!’ Farid was almost shouting at her. ‘Why would he do a thing like that?’

But Roxane ran her finger over Dustfinger’s scars, fine, pale lines, as fine as if a glass man’s pen, and not a knife, had drawn them. ‘There’s a story that the strolling players tell their children,’ she said, without looking at any of them. ‘About a fire-eater whose son the White Women took. In his despair he remembered something that was said about them: they fear fire, yet long for its warmth. So he decided to summon them by his art and ask them to give him back his son. It worked. He summoned them with fire, he made it dance and sing for them, and they did not deliver his son to death but gave him his life back. However, they took the fire-eater with them, and he never came back. The story says he must live with them for ever, until the end of time, and make fire dance for them.’ Roxane picked up Dustfinger’s lifeless hand and kissed the soot-blackened fingertips. ‘It’s only a story,’ she went on. ‘But he loved to hear it. He always said it was so beautiful that there must be a grain of truth in it. Whether that’s so or not – he’s made it come true himself now, and he’ll never return. In spite of his promise. Not this time.’

Farid stared at her in horror. Watching his face, Meggie saw memory return: the memory of Basta’s knife. He reached round to his back, and when he withdrew his hand his own blood was sticking to his fingers. His tunic was still damp with it.

‘You were dead, Farid!’ Meggie whispered. ‘And Dustfinger brought you back.’ She closed her eyes so as not to see that motionless figure any more. She wanted to see other pictures: Dustfinger breathing fire for her in Elinor’s garden, or guiding her and Mo through the hills away from Capricorn’s dreadful village, and his happiness when she first saw him in his own world. He had both betrayed and rescued her – and now he had given her Farid back. Tears were running down her face, and she hardly noticed when her mother knelt down beside her.

It was a long night.

Roxane and the Prince kept watch by Dustfinger’s side, but Farid had climbed out of the mine to where the moon was showing through black clouds, and mist rose from the ground that was wet with rain. He had pushed aside the guards who tried to stop him and thrown himself down on the moss. He lay there now under Mortola’s venomous trees, sobbing – while the two martens scuffled in the darkness as if they still had a master to quarrel over.

Of course Meggie went to him, but Farid sent her away, so she set off to find Mo. Resa was asleep beside him, her face wet with tears, but Mo was awake. He sat there with his arm around her sleeping mother, and looked into the darkness as if a story was written there – a story that he didn’t yet understand. For the first time, Meggie couldn’t read in his face what he was thinking. There was something strange and closed in it, hard as the scab over a wound, but when he noticed her enquiring look he smiled at her, and all the strangeness was gone.

‘Come here,’ he said softly, and she sat down beside him and pressed her face into his shoulder. ‘I want to go home, Mo!’ she whispered.

‘No, you don’t,’ he whispered back, and she sobbed into his shirt, as she had done so often when she was a little girl. She had been able to unload all her grief on to him, however

heavily it weighed. Mo had brushed it away simply by stroking her hair, putting his hand on her brow and whispering her name, and that was what he did now in this sad place, on this sad night. He couldn't take all the pain away, there was too much of it, but he could help just by holding her close. No one could do it better. Not Resa. Not even Farid.

Yes, it was a long night, as long as a thousand nights, darker than any that Meggie had ever known. And she didn't know how long she had been sleeping beside Mo when Farid was suddenly shaking her awake. He led her off with him, away from her sleeping parents, into a dark corner that smelled of the Prince's bear.

'Meggie,' he whispered, taking her hand between his and pressing it so hard that it hurt. 'I know how we can make everything right again. You go to Fenoglio! Tell him to write something that will bring Dustfinger back to life! He'll listen to you!'

Of course. She might have known he would think up this idea. He was looking at her so pleadingly that it hurt, but she shook her head.

'No, Farid. Dustfinger is dead. Fenoglio can't do anything for him. And even if he could – haven't you heard what he keeps muttering to himself? He says he'll never write another word, not after what happened to Cosimo.'

Fenoglio had indeed changed. Meggie had hardly recognized him when she saw him again. Once, his eyes had always reminded her of a little boy's. Now they were an old man's eyes. His gaze was suspicious, uncertain, as if he didn't trust the ground under his feet any more, and since Cosimo's death he cared nothing for shaving himself, combing his hair or washing. He had asked only about the book that Mo had bound. But not even Meggie's assurance that its blank pages did indeed ward off death had wiped the bitterness from his face. 'Oh, wonderful!' he had muttered. 'The Adderhead's immortal and

Cosimo's dead as a doornail. Nothing goes right with this story any more.' And he had gone off again, far from all the others. No, Fenoglio wouldn't help anyone any more, not even himself. All the same, when Farid set off in search of him, Meggie went too.

Fenoglio was spending most of his time these days in one of the deepest galleries of the mine, a place almost entirely filled with rubble, to which no one else climbed down. He was asleep when they clambered down the steep ladder, the fur that the robbers had given him drawn up to his chin, his old forehead wrinkled as if he were thinking hard even in his dreams.

'Fenoglio!' Farid roughly shook him awake.

The old man turned over on his back with a grunt that would have done the Prince's bear credit. Then he opened his eyes and stared at Farid as if seeing his dark face for the very first time. 'Oh, it's you!' he growled, dazed with sleep, and propped himself on his elbows. 'The boy who came back from the dead. Something else that I never wrote! What do you want? Do you know I was just having my first good dream for days?'

'You must write us something!'

'Write something? I'm never going to write again. Haven't we seen what comes of it? I have this fabulous idea about the book of immortality that will set the good characters free and bring the Adderhead to his death in the most subtle way. And what happens? The Adder is immortal now, and the forest is full of corpses again! Robbers, strolling players, the two-fingered man – dead! Why do I keep making them up if this story is only going to kill them? Oh, this thrice-accursed story! It's in love with Death!'

'But you must bring him back!' Farid's lips were trembling. 'You made the Adderhead immortal, so why not him?'

'You're talking about Dustfinger, aren't you?' Fenoglio sat up and rubbed his face, sighing heavily. 'Yes, he's dead now too, dead as a doornail, but I'd planned that a long way back, as you

perhaps remember. Be that as it may, Dustfinger is dead, you were dead ... Minerva's husband, Cosimo, the boys who rode with him, they're all dead! Can't this story think of anything else? I'll tell you something, my boy. I'm not its author any more. No, the author is Death, the Grim Reaper, the Cold Man, call him what you like. It's his dance, and never mind what I write he'll take my words and make them serve him!

'Nonsense!' Farid was no longer even wiping away the tears that streamed down his face. 'You must fetch him back. It wasn't his death at all, it was mine! Make him breathe again! It will only take a few words. After all, you did it for Cosimo and for Silvertongue.'

'Just a moment – Meggie's father wasn't dead yet,' Fenoglio soberly pointed out. 'And as for Cosimo, he only looked like Cosimo – how many more times do I have to explain that? Meggie and I made a brand-new Cosimo, and unfortunately it went terribly wrong. No!' He reached into his belt, produced something resembling a handkerchief, and blew his nose noisily. 'This is not a story in which the dead come to life! All right, I admit I brought immortality into it, yes. But that's different from bringing back the dead. No, when someone is dead here, he stays dead! It's the same in this world as in the one I come from. Dustfinger got around that rule very cleverly on your behalf. Perhaps I wrote the sentimental story that gave him the idea myself ... I really don't remember, but never mind, there are always gaps. And he paid for your life with his own. That's always been the only trade-off that Death will accept. Who'd have thought it? Dustfinger, of all people, gets so fond of a good-for-nothing boy that he ends up dying for him. I admit it's a much better idea than the one about the marten, but it isn't mine. Oh no! So if you're looking for someone to blame, then blame yourself. Because one thing is certain, my boy –' and so saying he jabbed his finger roughly into Farid's thin chest – 'and it's that you don't belong in this story! And if you hadn't

taken it into your head to wangle your way into it, Dustfinger would still be alive—'

Farid punched Fenoglio in the face before Meggie could pull him back.

'How can you say a thing like that?' she shouted at Fenoglio as Farid, sobbing, put his arms around her. 'Farid saved Dustfinger at the mill. He's protected him ever since he arrived here—'

'Yes, yes, all right!' growled Fenoglio, feeling his nose. It hurt. 'I'm a heartless old man, I know. But although you may not believe it, I felt dreadful when I saw Dustfinger lying there. And then Roxane's tears, appalling, really appalling. All the wounded men, Meggie, all the dead, so many dead ... no, Meggie, the words don't obey me any more. Except when it suits them. They've turned against me like snakes.'

'Exactly. You're a failure, a miserable failure!' Farid shook Meggie off. 'You don't know your own trade. But someone else does. The man who brought Dustfinger here. Orpheus. He'll get him back, you wait and see. Write him here! You can at least do that! Yes, write Orpheus here at once or ... or ... I'll tell the Adderhead you were going to kill him, I'll tell all the women in Ombra it's your fault their menfolk are dead ... I'll ... I'll ...'

He stood there with his fists clenched, quivering with rage and despair. But the old man just looked at him. Then, with difficulty, he rose to his feet. 'Do you know something, my boy?' he said, putting his face very close to Farid's. 'If you'd asked me nicely I might have tried, but not this way. No, no! Fenoglio must be asked, not threatened. I still have that much pride left.'

At this Farid looked like going for him again, but Meggie held him back. 'Fenoglio, stop it!' she shouted at the old man. 'He's desperate, can't you see that?'

'Desperate? So what? I'm desperate too!' Fenoglio snapped at her. 'My story is foundering in misfortune, and these hands

here,' he said, holding them out to her, 'don't want to write any more! I'm afraid of words, Meggie! Once they were like honey, now they're poison, pure poison! But what is a writer who doesn't love words any more? What have I come to? This story is devouring me, crushing me, and I'm its creator!'

'Fetch Orpheus!' said Farid hoarsely. Meggie could hear how much trouble he was taking to control his voice, to banish the rage from it. 'Bring him here, and let him write it for you! Teach him what you know, the way Dustfinger taught me everything! Let him find the right words for you. He loves your story, he told Dustfinger so himself! He even wrote you a letter when he was a boy.'

'Did he?' For a moment Fenoglio sounded almost like his old inquisitive self.

'Yes, he admires you! He thinks this is the best of all stories, he said so!'

'Really?' Fenoglio sounded flattered. 'Well, it isn't bad. That is to say, it *wasn't* bad.' He looked thoughtfully at Farid. 'A pupil. A pupil for Fenoglio,' he murmured. 'A writer's apprentice. Hm. Orpheus ...' He spoke the name as if he had to taste it. 'The only poet who ever challenged Death ... appropriate.'

Farid was looking at him so hopefully that it went to Meggie's heart again. But Fenoglio smiled, even though it was a sad smile.

'Look at him, Meggie!' he said. 'He has the same pleading look as my grandchildren could turn on to wheedle anything out of me. Does he look at you the same way when he wants something from you?'

Meggie felt herself blushing. However, Fenoglio turned back to Farid. 'You know we'll need Meggie's help, don't you?'

Farid nodded, and looked at her.

‘I’ll read it,’ she said quietly. ‘If Fenoglio writes it, I’ll read it.’ And get the man who helped Mortola to bring my father here and almost kill him into this story, Meggie added in her thoughts. She tried not to think of what Mo would say about the deal.

However, Fenoglio already seemed to be searching for words in his mind. The right words – words that would not betray and deceive him. ‘Very well,’ he muttered abstractedly, ‘let’s get down to work one last time. But where am I going to find paper and ink? Not to mention a pen and a helpful glass man? Poor Rosenquartz is still in Ombra.’

‘I have paper,’ said Meggie, ‘and a pencil.’

‘That’s very beautiful,’ said Fenoglio when she put her notebook in his lap. ‘Did your father bind it?’

Meggie nodded.

‘There are some pages torn out.’

‘Yes, for a message to my mother and the letter I sent you. The one that Cloud-Dancer brought you.’

‘Oh. Oh yes. Him.’ For a moment Fenoglio looked dreadfully tired. ‘Books with blank pages,’ he murmured. ‘They seem to be playing more and more of a part in this story, don’t you think?’ Then he asked Meggie to leave him alone with Farid so that the boy could tell him about Orpheus. ‘To be honest,’ he whispered to Meggie, ‘I think he vastly over-estimates the man’s abilities! What has this fellow Orpheus done? Put my own words together in a different order, that’s all. But I’ll admit I’m curious to meet him. It takes a fair amount of megalomania to give yourself a name like that, and megalomania is an interesting character trait.’

Meggie did not share his opinion, but it was too late to go back on her promise. She would read again. For Farid this time. She went quietly back to her parents, laid her head on Mo’s chest and fell asleep hearing his heartbeat in her ear. Words had saved him; why shouldn’t they do the same for Dustfinger?

Even if he had gone far, far away ... didn't the words of this world rule even the land of silence?



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The Bluejay

The world existed to be read. And I read it.

L.S. Schwartz,
Ruined by Reading

R esa and Meggie were asleep when Mo woke, but he felt as if he couldn't breathe among all the stones and the dead a moment longer. The men guarding the entrance of the mine greeted him with a nod as he came climbing up to them. Pale morning light was seeping through the crevice that led to the outside world; the air smelled of rosemary, thyme, and the berries on Mortola's poisonous trees. Mo's senses were constantly confused by the way the familiar mingled with the strange in Fenoglio's world – and by the fact that the strange features often struck him as more real than the others.

The guards were not the only men Mo met at the entrance to the mine. Five more were leaning against the walls of the gallery, among them Snapper and the Black Prince himself.

'Ah, here comes the most wanted robber between Ombra and the sea!' said Snapper, low-voiced, as Mo came towards them. They examined him like some new kind of animal, of which they had heard the strangest stories. And Mo felt more than ever like an actor who had stepped on stage with the

unpleasant feeling that he knew neither the play nor his part in it.

‘I don’t know how the rest of you feel,’ said Snapper, glancing round at the others, ‘but I always thought some writer had made up the Bluejay. And that the only man who might lay claim to that feathered mask was our own Black Prince, even if he doesn’t entirely match the description in the songs. So when folk said the Bluejay was a prisoner in the Castle of Night, I thought they just wanted to hang some other poor fellow because he happened to have a scar on his arm. But then,’ he said, looking Mo up and down as extensively as if assessing him by every line of every song he had ever heard about the Bluejay, ‘then I saw you fight in the forest ... *and his sword-blade flashes through them like a needle through the pages*, isn’t that what one of the songs says? A good description, indeed!’

Oh yes, Snapper? thought Mo. Suppose I were to tell you that the Bluejay was really made up by a writer, just like you?

How furtively they were all looking at him.

‘We must get away from here,’ said the Prince into the silence. ‘They’re combing the forest all the way down to the sea. They’ve already found two of our hiding-places and smoked them out – they haven’t yet come upon the mine, but only because they don’t expect us to be so close to their own back door.’ The bear grunted, as if amused by the stupidity of the men-at-arms. The grey muzzle in the furry black face, the clever little amber eyes – Mo had liked the bear even in the book, although he had imagined him slightly larger. ‘Tonight half of us will take the injured to the Badger’s Earth,’ the Black Prince continued, ‘and the others will go to Ombra with me and Roxane.’

‘And where does *he* go?’ Snapper was looking at Mo. Then they all looked at him. Mo felt as if their eyes were fingering his skin. Eyes full of hope, but what for? What had they heard about him? Were people already telling stories about what had

happened at the Castle of Night, about the book full of blank pages, and Firefox's death?

'He has to get away from here, what else do you think? A long way away!' The Prince picked a dead leaf out of the bear's coat. 'The Adderhead will be looking for him, even though he's spreading word everywhere that Mortola was responsible for the attack in the forest.' He nodded to a thin boy, at least a head shorter than Meggie, who was standing among the men. 'Tell us again what the crier announced in your village.'

'This,' began the boy in a hesitant voice, 'this is the Adderhead's promise: If the Bluejay ever ventures to show his face in Argenta again, he will die the slowest death that the executioners of the Castle of Night have ever given anyone. And the man who brings him in will be rewarded with the Bluejay's weight in silver.'

'Better start starving yourself, then, Bluejay,' mocked Snapper, but none of the others laughed.

'Did you really make him immortal?' It was the boy who asked this question.

Snapper laughed out loud. 'Listen to the lad! I expect you think the Prince can fly too, eh?'

But the boy took no notice of him. He was still looking at Mo. 'They say you yourself can't die,' he said in a low voice. 'They say you made yourself a book like that too, a book of white pages with your death held captive in it.'

Mo had to smile. Meggie had so often looked at him wide-eyed, just like that. *Is it a true story, Mo? Come on, tell me!* They were all waiting for his answer, even the Black Prince. He saw it in their faces.

'Oh, I can die all right,' he said. 'Believe me, I have come very close. As for the Adderhead, however – yes, I have made him immortal. But not for long.'

'What do you mean by that?' The smile had long since frozen on Snapper's coarse-featured face.

Mo was looking not at him but at the Black Prince when he answered. 'I mean that at present nothing can kill the Adderhead. No sword, no knife, no disease. The book I have bound for him protects him. But the same book will be his undoing, for he will have only a few weeks to enjoy it.'

'Why's that?' It was the boy again.

Mo lowered his voice when he replied, just as he did when he was sharing a secret with Meggie. 'Oh, it's not particularly difficult to ensure that a book doesn't live long, you know. Particularly not for a bookbinder. And that's my trade, although so many people seem to think differently. Normally it's not my job to kill a book – on the contrary, I'm usually called in to save the lives of books – but in this case I'm afraid I had to do it. After all, I didn't want to be guilty of letting the Adderhead sit on his throne for all eternity, passing the time by hanging strolling players.'

'Then you *are* a wizard!' Snapper's voice was hoarse.

'No, really, I'm not,' replied Mo. 'Let me say it once again: I'm a bookbinder.'

They were staring at him again, and this time Mo wasn't sure whether there might not be some fear mingled with the respect in their eyes.

'Off you all go now!' The Prince's voice broke the silence. 'Go and make litters for the injured.' They obeyed, although every one of them cast a last glance at Mo before they walked away. Only the boy gave him a bashful smile too.

As for the Black Prince, he signalled to Mo to go with him.

'A few weeks,' he repeated when they were in the gallery where he and the bear slept, away from the others. 'How many exactly?'

How many? Even Mo couldn't tell for sure. If they didn't notice what he had done for the time being, it would all be quite quick. 'Not very many,' he replied.

‘And they won’t be able to save the book?’

‘No.’

The Prince smiled. It was the first smile Mo had seen on his dark face. ‘That’s consoling news, Bluejay. It saps one’s courage to fight an immortal enemy. But you do know, don’t you, that he’ll only hunt you down all the more pitilessly when he realizes that you’ve tricked him?’

So he would, indeed. That was why Mo hadn’t told Meggie, had done what had to be done in secret, while she was asleep. He hadn’t wanted the Adderhead to see the fear in her face.

‘I don’t intend to come back to this side of the forest,’ he told the Prince. ‘Perhaps there’ll be a good hiding-place for us somewhere near Ombra.’

The Prince smiled again. ‘I’m sure there will be,’ he said, and looked at Mo as intently as if he meant to see straight into his heart. Go on, try it, thought Mo. Look into my heart and tell me what you find there, because I don’t know myself any more. He remembered reading about the Black Prince for the first time. What a fabulous character, he had thought, but the man now standing before him was considerably more impressive than the image of him that the words had conjured up. Perhaps a little smaller, though. And a little sadder.

‘Your wife says you’re not the man we take you for,’ said the Prince. ‘Dustfinger said the same. He told me that you come from the country where he spent all those years when we thought he was dead. Is it very different from here?’

Mo couldn’t help smiling. ‘Oh yes. I think so.’

‘How? Are people happier there?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Perhaps! Hm.’ The Prince bent, and picked up something lying on the blanket under which he slept. ‘I’ve forgotten what your wife calls you. Dustfinger had a strange name for you: Silvertongue. But Dustfinger is dead, and to everyone else you

will be the Bluejay now. Even I find it difficult to call you anything else, after seeing you fight in the forest. So this belongs to you here in future. Unless you decide to go back after all ... back to the country where you came from, and where I suppose you have another name.'

Mo had never before seen the mask that the Prince was holding out to him. The leather was dark and damaged here and there, but the feathers shone brightly: white, black, yellowish-brown, blue. The colours of a bluejay.

'This mask has been celebrated in many songs,' said the Black Prince. 'I allowed myself to wear it for a while, and several of us have done so too, but now it is yours.'

In silence, Mo turned the mask this way and that in his hands. For a strange moment he felt an urge to put it on, as if he had done so many times before. Oh yes, Fenoglio's words were powerful, but words they were, nothing but words – even if they had been written for him. Any actor, surely, could choose the part he played?

'No,' he said, handing the mask back to the Prince. 'Snapper is right; the Bluejay is a fantasy, an old man's invention. Fighting, I assure you, is not my trade.'

The Prince looked at him thoughtfully, but he did not take the mask. 'Keep it all the same,' he said. 'It's too dangerous for anyone to wear it now. And as for your trade – none of us here was born a robber.'

Mo said nothing to that. He just looked at his fingers. It had taken him a long time to wash off all the blood on them after the fight in the forest.

He was still standing there holding the mask, alone in the dark gallery that smelled of the long-forgotten dead, when he heard Meggie's voice behind him.

'Mo?' She looked at his face with concern. 'Where have you been? Roxane is setting out soon, and Resa wants to know if we're going with her. What do you say?'

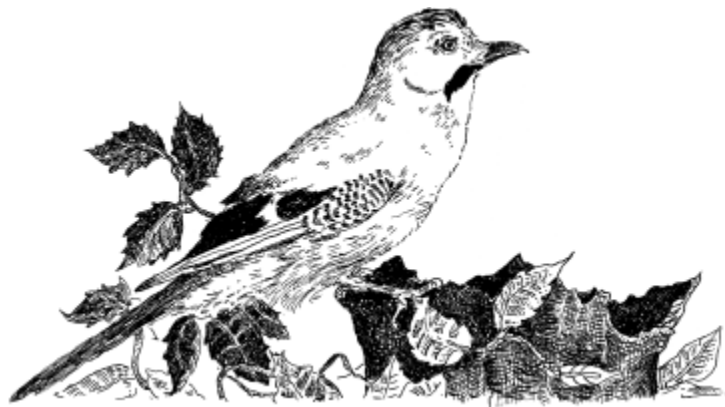
Yes, what did he say? Where did he want to go? Back to my workshop, he thought. Back to Elinor's house. Or did he?

What did Meggie want? He had only to look at her to know the answer. Of course. She wanted to stay because of the boy, but he was not the only reason. Resa wanted to stay too, in spite of the dungeon where they had put her, in spite of all the pain and darkness. What was it about Fenoglio's world that filled the heart with longing? Didn't he feel it himself? Like sweet poison that worked on you only too quickly ...

'What do you say, Mo?' Meggie took his hand. How tall she had grown.

'What do I say?' He listened as though, if he concentrated hard, he could hear the words whispering in the walls of the gallery, or in the weave of the blanket under which the Black Prince slept. But all he heard was his own voice. 'How would you like it if I said: show me the fairies, Meggie? And the water-nymphs. And that illuminator in Ombra castle. Let's find out how fine those brushes really are.'

Dangerous words. But Meggie hugged him harder than she had since she was a little girl.



Farid's Hope

And now he was dead, his soul fled down to the Sunless Country and his body lying cold in the cold mud, somewhere in the city's wake.

**Philip Reeve,
*Mortal Engines***

When the men on guard raised the alarm for the second time, just before sunset, the Black Prince ordered everyone to climb deep down into the mine, where there was water in the narrow passages and you thought you could hear the earth breathing. But one man did not join them: Fenoglio. When the Prince gave the all-clear, and Meggie climbed up again with the others, her feet wet and her heart still full of fear, Fenoglio came towards her and drew her aside. Luckily Mo happened to be talking to Resa and didn't notice.

'Here you are. But I'm not guaranteeing anything,' Fenoglio whispered to her as he gave her the notebook back. 'This is very likely another mistake in black and white just like the others, but I'm too tired to worry about it. Feed this damned story, feed it with new words, I'm not going to listen. I'm going to lie down and sleep. That was the last thing I will ever write in my life.'

Feed it.

Farid suggested that Meggie should read Fenoglio's words in the place where he and Dustfinger had slept. Dustfinger's rucksack was still lying beside his blanket, and the two martens had curled up to the right and left of it. Farid crouched down between them and hugged the rucksack to him as if Dustfinger's heart were beating inside. He looked expectantly at Meggie, but she remained silent. She looked at the words and said nothing. Fenoglio's writing swam before her eyes as if, for the first time, it did not want her to read it.

'Meggie?' Farid was still looking at her. There was such sadness in his eyes, such despair. For him, she thought. Just for him. And she knelt down on the blanket where Dustfinger used to sleep.

Even as she read the first few words, she sensed that Fenoglio had done his work well yet again. She felt it like breath on her face. The letters on the page were alive, the story was alive. It wanted to take those words and grow. That was what it wanted. Had Fenoglio felt the same when he wrote them?

'One day, when Death had taken much prey again,' began Meggie, and it was almost as if she were reading a familiar book that she had only just laid aside, 'Fenoglio the great poet decided to write no more. He was tired of words and their seductive power. He had had enough of the way they cheated and scorned him, and kept silent when they should have spoken. So he called on another, younger man, Orpheus by name – skilled in letters, even if he could not yet handle them with the mastery of Fenoglio himself – and decided to instruct him in his art, as every master does at some time. For a while Orpheus should play with words in his place, seduce and lie with them, create and destroy, banish and restore – while Fenoglio waited for his weariness to pass, for his pleasure in words to reawaken, and then he would send Orpheus back to the world from which he had summoned him, to keep his story alive with new words never used before.'

Meggie's voice died away. It echoed underground as if it had a shadow. And just as silence was spreading around them, they

heard footsteps.

Footsteps on the damp stone.



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Alone Again

Hope is the thing with feathers.

Emily Dickinson,
'Hope',
The Poems of Emily Dickinson

Orpheus disappeared right in front of Elinor's eyes. She was standing only a few steps from him, holding the bottle of wine he had demanded, when he simply vanished into thin air – into less than thin air, into nothing – as if he had never been there at all, as if she had only dreamed him. The bottle slipped from her hand, fell on the wooden floorboards of the library, and broke among the books that Orpheus had left open there.

The dog began to howl so horribly that Darius came racing out of the kitchen. The wardrobe-man didn't bar his way. He was simply staring at the place where Orpheus had been standing a moment ago. His voice trembling, he had been reading from a sheet of paper lying on one of Elinor's glass display cases right in front of him, and clutching *Inkheart* to his breast, as if he could force the book to accept him at last in that way. Elinor had stopped as if turned to stone when she realized what he was trying to do for the hundredth, even the thousandth time. Perhaps they'll come back out of the book to replace him, she had thought, or at least one of them: Meggie,

Resa, Mortimer. Each of the three names tasted so bitter on her tongue, as bitter as all that is lost. But now Orpheus had gone, and none of the three had come back. Only the damned dog refused to stop howling.

‘He’s done it,’ whispered Elinor. ‘Darius, he’s done it! He’s over there ... they’re all over there. All except for us!’

For a moment she felt infinitely sorry for herself. Here she was, Elinor Loredan, among all her books, and they wouldn’t let her in, not one of them would let her in. Closed doors enticing her, filling her heart with longing, and then letting her go no further than the doorway. Accursed, blasted, heartless things! Full of empty promises, full of false lures, always making you hungry, never satisfying you, never!

But you once saw it quite differently, Elinor! she reminded herself, wiping the tears from her eyes. So what? Wasn’t she old enough to change her mind, to bury an old love that had betrayed her miserably? They had not let her in. All the others were between their pages now, but she wasn’t. Poor Elinor, poor, lonely Elinor! She sobbed so loudly that she had to put her hand over her mouth.

Darius cast her a sympathetic glance and hesitantly came to her side. Well, at least he was still with her, that was one good thing. And of course he could read her thoughts in her face, as always. But he couldn’t help her either.

I want to be with them, she thought despairingly. They’re my family: Resa and Meggie and Mortimer. I want to see the Wayless Wood and feel a fairy settle on my hand again, I want to meet the Black Prince even if it means smelling his bear, I want to hear Dustfinger talking to fire even if I still can’t stand the man! I want, I want, I want ...

‘Oh, Darius!’ sobbed Elinor. ‘Why didn’t the wretched fellow take me too?’ But Darius just looked at her with his wise, owl-like eyes.

‘Hey, where did he go? That bastard still owed me money!’ Sugar went to the place where Orpheus had disappeared and looked all round him, as if Orpheus might be stuck among the bookshelves somewhere. ‘Damn it, what does he think he’s doing, just vanishing like that?’ He bent down and picked up a sheet of paper.

The sheet of paper that Orpheus had been reading from! Had he taken the book with him, but left behind the words that had opened the door for him? If so, then all was not lost after all ... With determination, Elinor snatched the sheet of paper from Sugar’s hand. ‘Give me that!’ she demanded, clutching it to her breast just as Orpheus had clutched the book. The wardrobe-man’s face darkened.

Two very different feelings seemed to be struggling with each other on his face: anger at Elinor’s boldness, and fear of the written words that she was pressing to her breast so passionately. For a moment Elinor wasn’t sure which would get the upper hand. Darius came up behind her, as if he seriously intended to defend her if necessary, but luckily Sugar’s face cleared again, and he began to laugh.

‘Well, fancy that!’ he mocked her. ‘What do you want that scrap of paper for? Do you want to disappear into thin air too, like Orpheus and the Magpie and your two friends? Feel free, but first I want the wages Orpheus and the old woman still owe me!’ And he looked around Elinor’s library as if he might see something in it that would do instead of payment.

‘Your wages, yes, of course, I understand!’ said Elinor quickly, leading him to the door. ‘I still have some money hidden in my room. Darius, you know where it is. Give it to him, all that’s left, just so long as he goes away.’

Darius did not look very enthusiastic, but Sugar gave such a broad smile that you could see every one of his bad teeth. ‘Well, that sounds like sense at last!’ he grunted, and stomped after

Darius who, resigned to this development, led him to Elinor's room.

But Elinor stayed behind in the library.

How quiet it suddenly was there. Orpheus had indeed sent all the characters he had read out of their books back into them again. Only his dog was still there, tail drooping as it sniffed the spot where its master had been standing only a few minutes before.

'So empty!' Elinor murmured. 'So empty.' She felt desolate. Almost more so than on the day when the Magpie had taken Mortimer and Resa away. The book into which they had all disappeared was gone. What happened to a book that disappeared into its own story?

Oh, forget the book, Elinor! she thought as a tear ran down her nose. How are you ever going to find them again now?

Orpheus's words. They swam before her eyes as she looked at the paper. Yes, they must have taken him over there, what else? Carefully, she opened the glass case on which the paper had been lying before Orpheus disappeared and took out the book inside it – a wonderfully illustrated edition of Hans Andersen's fairy-tales signed by the author himself – and put the sheet of paper in its place.

A New Poet

The joy of writing
The power of preserving,
Revenge of a mortal hand.

Wislaw Szymborska,
'The joy of writing',
View with a Grain of Sand

At first Orpheus could hardly be seen in the shadows filling the gallery like black breath. He stepped hesitantly into the light of the oil lamp by whose light Meggie had been reading. She thought she saw him put something under his jacket, but she couldn't make out what it was. Perhaps a book.

'Orpheus!' Farid ran to him, still holding Dustfinger's rucksack in his arms.

So he was really here. Orpheus. Meggie had imagined him very differently ... as much more impressive. This was just a man who was rather too stout, still very young, in an ill-fitting suit, and he looked as out of place in the Inkworld as a polar bear or a whale. In addition, he seemed to have lost his tongue. He stood there in a daze, looking at Meggie, at the dark gallery down which he had come, and finally at Farid, who had obviously entirely forgotten that the man he now greeted with such a radiant smile had stolen from him and betrayed him to

Basta at their last meeting. Orpheus didn't even seem to recognize Farid, but when he finally did it brought his voice back.

'Dustfinger's boy! How did you get here?' he faltered. And yes, Meggie had to admit that his voice was impressive, much more impressive than his face. 'Well, never mind that. This must be the Inkworld!' he went on, taking no more notice of Farid. 'I knew I could do it! I knew I could!' A self-satisfied smile spread over his face. Gwin leaped up, hissing, as he almost trod on his tail, but Orpheus didn't even notice the marten. 'Fantastic!' he murmured as he ran the palm of his hand over the gallery walls. 'I suppose this is one of the passages that lead to the princely tombs under the castle of Ombra.'

'No, it's not,' said Meggie coldly. Orpheus – in league with Mortola – a magic-tongued deceiver. How empty his round face looked! No wonder, she thought with great dislike, as she rose from the place where Dustfinger had slept. He has no conscience, no sympathy, no heart. Why had she brought him here? As if there weren't enough of his sort in the Inkworld. I did it for Farid, replied her heart, for Farid ...

'How are Elinor and Darius? If you've done anything to them ...' Meggie didn't finish her sentence. If he had, then what?

Orpheus turned, with as much surprise as if he hadn't seen her at all before. 'Elinor and Darius? Oh, are you that girl who apparently read herself here?' His eyes became watchful. Obviously he remembered what he had done to her parents.

'My father almost died because of you!' Meggie was angry with herself for the way her voice shook.

Orpheus blushed childishly red, whether in annoyance or embarrassment Meggie couldn't have said, but whichever it was he quickly recovered. 'Well, how can I help it if Mortola had a score to settle with him?' he replied. 'And from what you say I take it that he's still alive, so there's nothing to get upset about,

is there?' Shrugging, he turned his back to Meggie. 'Strange!' he murmured, glancing at the rubble at the end of the gallery, the narrow ladders and the props supporting the roof. 'Will someone explain exactly where I am? This looks almost like a mine, but I didn't read anything about a mine ...'

'Never mind what you read. I'm the one who brought you here.'

Meggie's voice was so sharp that Farid cast her a glance of alarm.

'You?' Orpheus turned and examined her so condescendingly that the blood rushed to Meggie's face. 'You obviously don't know who you're talking to. But why am I bothering with you anyway? I'm tired of looking at this unattractive mine. Where are the fairies? The men-at-arms? The strolling players?' He roughly pushed Meggie aside and went to the ladder, but Farid barred his way.

'You stay where you are, Cheeseface!' he snapped. 'Do you want to know why you're here? Because of Dustfinger.'

'Oh yes?' There was derision in Orpheus's laughter. 'Haven't you found him yet? Well, perhaps he doesn't want to be found, or not by a persistent fellow like you ...'

'He's dead,' Farid interrupted brusquely. 'Dustfinger is dead, and the only reason why Meggie read you here is for you to write him back!'

'She – did – not – read – me – here! How many more times do I have to tell you?' Orpheus made for the ladder again, but Farid simply took his hand without a word and led him over to the place where Dustfinger was.

Roxane had hung his cloak in front of the gallery where he was still lying, motionless as if the earth had crushed him. She and Resa had placed burning candles around him – dancing fire instead of the flowers usually laid beside corpses.

‘Good heavens!’ exclaimed Orpheus when he saw him lying there. ‘Dead! He really is dead! But this is terrible!’

Meggie was amazed to see that there were tears in his eyes. His fingers shook as he took his misted-up glasses off his nose and polished them on his jacket. Then, hesitantly, he went up to Dustfinger, bent and touched his hand.

‘Cold!’ he whispered, and retreated. His eyes blurred with tears; he looked at Farid. ‘Was it Basta? Come on, tell me! No, wait, how did it go? Was Basta even there? *Some of Capricorn’s men*, yes, that was it, they were going to kill the marten and Dustfinger tried to save him! I wept my eyes out when I read that chapter, I threw the book at the wall! And now I get here at last and—’ He was struggling for breath. ‘I only sent him back because I thought he’d be safe here now! Oh God. Oh God, oh God, oh God! Dead!’ Orpheus sobbed – and then fell silent. He bent over Dustfinger’s body again. ‘Wait a moment. *Stabbed. Stabbed*, that’s what it says in the book. So where’s the wound? *Stabbed for the marten’s sake*, yes, that’s what it said.’ He turned abruptly and stared at Gwin, who was perched on Farid’s shoulders, hissing at him. ‘He left the marten behind. He left him and you both behind. So how is it possible that—’

Farid said nothing, as the marten affectionately licked his ear. Meggie felt so sorry for him, but when she put out her hand he drew back.

‘What’s that marten doing here? Tell me! Have you lost your tongue?’ There was a metallic edge to Orpheus’s beautiful voice.

‘He didn’t die for Gwin,’ whispered Farid.

‘No? Who did he die for, then?’

‘For me.’

This time Farid did not withdraw his hand when Meggie took it. But before he could tell Orpheus any more, they heard another voice behind them. Abrupt and angry.

‘Who’s this? What is a stranger doing here?’

Orpheus spun round as if caught in some guilty act. There stood Roxane. with Resa beside her. Orpheus stared at her in amazement. ‘Roxane!’ he whispered. ‘The beautiful minstrel woman! May I introduce myself? My name is Orpheus. I was a – a friend of Dustfinger’s. Yes, I think one could say that.’

‘Meggie!’ said Resa in a faltering voice. ‘How did he get here?’

Meggie instinctively hid the notebook containing Fenoglio’s words behind her back.

‘So how is Elinor?’ Resa asked Orpheus sharply. ‘And Darius? What have you done to them?’

‘Nothing!’ replied Orpheus. In his confusion he obviously didn’t notice that the woman who had been able to speak only with her fingers had a voice again. ‘Far from it. I went to a lot of trouble to help them feel more relaxed about books. They keep them like butterflies pinned in a case, each in its own place, imprisoned in their cells! But books want to breathe and sing, they want to feel air between their pages, and a reader’s fingers tenderly stroking them—’

Roxane took Dustfinger’s cloak from the prop over which she had draped it. ‘You don’t look like a friend of Dustfinger’s to me,’ she interrupted Orpheus. ‘But if you want to say goodbye to him, do it now, because I’m going to take him with me.’

‘Take him with you? What do you mean?’ Farid barred her way. ‘Orpheus is here to bring him back!’

‘Get out of my sight!’ Roxane snapped at him. ‘The very first time I saw you coming to my farm, I knew you brought bad luck. *You* ought to be dead, not Dustfinger. That’s how it is and that’s how it stays.’

Farid flinched as if Roxane had struck him. He did not resist as she pushed him aside, and stood there with his shoulders drooping as she bent over Dustfinger.

Meggie couldn't think of any way to comfort him, but her mother knelt down beside Roxane. 'Listen!' she said quietly. 'Dustfinger brought Farid back from the dead by making the words of a story come true. Words, Roxane! In this world they make strange things happen, and Orpheus knows a lot about words.'

'Oh yes, I do!' Orpheus quickly went to Roxane's side. 'I made him a door of words so that he could come back to you, did he never tell you?'

Roxane looked at him disbelievingly, but the magic of his voice worked on her too. 'Yes, believe me, I did it!' Orpheus went on. 'And I'll write something to bring him back from the dead. I'll find words as precious and intoxicating as the scent of a lily, words to beguile Death and open the cold fingers he has closed around Dustfinger's warm heart!' A delighted smile lit up his face, as if he were already relishing his great achievements to come.

But Roxane just shook her head, as if to free herself from the magic of his voice, and blew out the candles standing around Dustfinger. 'Now I understand,' she said, covering Dustfinger with his cloak. 'You're an enchanter. I only went to an enchanter once. After our younger daughter died. People who go to enchanters are desperate, and they know it. They live on false hopes like ravens preying on carrion. His promises sounded just as wonderful as yours. He promised me what I most desperately wanted. They all do. They promise to bring back what's lost for ever: a child, a friend – or a husband.' She drew the cloak over Dustfinger's still face. 'I'll never believe such promises again. They only make the pain worse. I'll take him back to Ombra with me and find a place there where no one will disturb him, not the Adderhead, not the wolves, not even the fairies. And he will still look as if he were only sleeping long after my hair is white, for I know from Nettle how you go about preserving the body even when the soul is long gone.'

‘You’ll tell me where that is, won’t you?’ Farid’s voice trembled, as if he knew Roxane’s answer already. ‘You’ll tell me where you’re taking him?’

‘No,’ said Roxane. ‘You least of all.’

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Where Now?

The Giant rested back in his chair. ‘You’ve some stories left,’ he said. ‘I can smell them on your skin.’

**Brian Patten,
*The Story Giant***

Farid watched as they laid the injured on litters under cover of night. The injured and the dead. Six robbers were standing among the trees listening for any sound that might mean danger. Only the tops of the silver towers were to be seen in the distance, bright in the starlight, yet it seemed to them all as if the Adderhead could see them. Could he sense it up in his castle when they stole soft-footed over Mount Adder? Who could tell what the Adderhead might be able to do now? Now that he was immortal, and as invincible as

Death itself?

But the night was still, as still as Dustfinger, who was to be taken back to Ombra on a cart drawn by the Black Prince’s bear. Meggie was going there too for the time being, to the other side of the forest, with Silvertongue and her mother. The Black Prince had told them of a village too poor and remote from any road to interest princes. He would hide them there, or on one of the nearby farms.

Should he go with them?

Farid saw Meggie looking at him. She was standing with her mother and the other women. Silvertongue was with the robbers, and hanging from his belt was the sword with which he had apparently killed Basta – and not just Basta. Almost a dozen men had died at his hands, so several of the robbers had told Farid, their voices lowered in respect. Amazing. Back in the hills around Capricorn's village, Silvertongue couldn't have killed a blackbird when they were in hiding together, let alone a human being. On the other hand, how had he himself learned to kill? The answer was not hard to find. Fear and rage. And there was enough of those in this story.

Roxane was with the robbers too. She turned her back on Farid when she noticed him looking at her. She treated him like air – as if he had never returned to the land of the living, as if he were only a ghost, an ill-intentioned ghost who had devoured her husband's heart. 'What was it like being dead, Farid?' Meggie had asked him. But he couldn't remember. Or perhaps he didn't want to remember.

Orpheus was standing barely two paces away from him, shivering in the thin shirt he wore. The Prince had told him he must change his light-coloured suit for a dark cloak and woollen trousers. But in spite of the clothes he still looked like a cuckoo among sparrows. Fenoglio was watching Orpheus like an old tom cat keeping a wary eye on a young one who has invaded his territory. 'He looks a fool!' Fenoglio had whispered this comment to Meggie just loud enough for everyone to hear it. 'Look at him. A callow youth, knows nothing about life, how is he going to be able to write? It might well be best to send him straight back, but never mind. There's no saving this wretched story now anyway.'

He was probably right. But why hadn't he at least tried to write Dustfinger back? Didn't he care anything for the characters he had created? Was he just moving them like pawns in a game of chess, enjoying their pain?

Farid clenched his fists in helpless anger. I would have tried, he thought. A hundred times, a thousand times, for the rest of my life. But he couldn't even read those strange little signs! The few that Dustfinger had taught him would never be enough to bring him back from where he was now. Even if he wrote his name in letters of fire on the walls of the Castle of Night, Dustfinger's face would remain as terribly still as when he last saw it.

No, only Orpheus could try it. But he hadn't written a single word since Meggie read him here. He just stood there – or paced up and down, up and down, while the robbers watched him suspiciously. The glances Silvertongue cast him were not very friendly either. He had turned pale when he saw Orpheus again. For a moment Farid had thought he would seize Cheeseface and beat him to a jelly, but Meggie had taken his hand and drawn him away. Whatever the two of them had said to each other, she wasn't telling Farid. She had known that her father would not approve if she read Orpheus here, but she had done it all the same. For him. Was Orpheus interested in any of that? Oh no. He was still acting as if his own voice, not Meggie's, had brought him here. Stuck-up, thrice-cursed son of a bitch!

'Farid? Have you made up your mind?' Farid came out of his gloomy thoughts. Meggie was standing in front of him. 'You will come with us, won't you? Resa says you can stay with us as long as you like, and Mo doesn't mind either.'

Silvertongue was still standing with the robbers, talking to the Black Prince. Farid saw Orpheus watching the two of them ... then he began pacing up and down once more, rubbed his forehead, smoothed back his hair, muttered as if talking to himself. Like a lunatic, thought Farid. I've pinned my hopes on a lunatic!

'Wait here.' He turned away from Meggie and went over to Orpheus. 'I'm going with Meggie,' he said brusquely. 'You can go wherever you like.'

Cheeseface straightened his glasses. 'What are you talking about? Of course I'm coming with you! After all, I want to see everything – the Wayless Wood, the Laughing Prince's castle.' He looked up at the hill. 'And of course I'd have liked to see the Castle of Night too, but after what's happened here, I suppose it isn't a good time. Well, this is only my first day here ... have you seen the Adderhead yourself? Is he very terrifying? I'd like to see those silver scales on the columns ...'

'You're not here to go sightseeing!' Farid's voice was choked with anger. What on earth was Cheeseface thinking of? How could he stand there looking around him as if he were on a pleasure trip, while Dustfinger would soon be lying in some dark crypt, or wherever Roxane planned to take him?

'Oh no?' Orpheus's round face darkened. 'Is that any way to talk to me? I'll do as I like. Do you think I've finally arrived where I always wanted to be just to have a snotty boy, who has no business here anyway, order me about? You think words can simply be plucked from the empty air? This is all about Death, you stupid boy! It could take months for me to get the right idea. Who knows? You don't call up ideas just like that, not even with fire, and we need a brilliant, a divine idea. Which means—' Orpheus inspected his fingernails, 'that I shall need a servant! Or do you want me to waste my time washing my own clothes and finding myself something to eat?'

The dog. The accursed dog. 'Very well. I'll be your servant too.' Farid brought the words out only with difficulty. 'If you will bring him back.'

'Excellent!' Orpheus smiled. 'Then, for a start, get me some food. It looks as if we're going to be embarking on a long and uncomfortable march.'

Farid gritted his teeth, but of course he obeyed. He would have scraped the silver from the towers of the Castle of Night to get Dustfinger breathing again.

‘Farid? What is it? Are you coming with us?’ Meggie stepped into his path as he ran past her, with bread and dried meat for Cheesehead in his pockets.

‘Yes – yes, we’re coming with you!’ He flung his arms round her neck, but only once he saw that Silvertongue’s back was turned to him. You never knew with fathers. ‘I’ll save him, Meggie!’ he whispered in her ear. ‘I’ll bring Dustfinger back. This story will have a happy ending. I swear!’

THE END

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From The Chicken House

Inkspell is no ordinary sequel. But then, Cornelia Funke is no ordinary writer ...

As Mo once told Meggie: 'Stories never really end, even if the books like to pretend they do.' So get ready to be literally pulled inside these pages, into the book from which Dustfinger first emerged, where the characters are struggling to come to terms with a story that is changing in front of them!

You're going to love it.

Barry Cunningham
Publisher



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If I knew where poems came from, I'd go there.

Michael Longley



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A note from the author:

When I had finished *Inkheart*, I suddenly found myself staring at the last page thinking: but ... what will happen now? Will Dustfinger find someone who'll read him back?

What happens to Basta and Mortola? And what about Meggie, Mo and Resa?

How do they feel being a family again? Will they stay with Elinor?

I missed my characters. I missed all of them. And I had the feeling that there was more to tell, much more.

I was right: the words for *Inkspell* came so easily, that I sometimes couldn't type fast enough. In fact, this second part was my greatest writing adventure so far.

And as no reader will forgive me the ending without a third part, this story will be another trilogy. Sorry.

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Praise for *INKHEART*

... a breathtakingly fast-moving tale.

INDEPENDENT

... one of the outstanding children's novels of the year.

THE TIMES

I don't think I've ever read anything that conveys so well the joys, terrors and pitfalls of reading.

DIANA WYNNE JONES, GUARDIAN

... the ideas about the relationship of author, characters and reader are so fascinating and resonant that it has to be a favourite for any bibliophile.

SUNDAY TIMES

... a story that celebrates books, and the conclusion is especially satisfying.

HORN BOOK

A complex ... tale of life and literature, creating almost 600 pages of endless delight.

IRISH TIMES

Suspenseful, darkly comic tale of 12-year-old Meggie, who discovers the perils of fictional characters coming to life.

TIME MAGAZINE

As beguiling as the trompe l'oeil painting on its cover.

NEW YORK TIMES

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CORNELIA FUNKE

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell



2 PALMER STREET, FROME, SOMERSET BA11 1DS

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To Rolf, always – it was the best of things to be married to Dustfinger.

*To Ileen, who knows all about loss and was always there to understand
and ease the pain.*

*To Andrew, Angie, Antonia, Cam and James, Caroline, Elinor, and last
but for sure not least, Lionel and Oliver, who all brought so much light,
warmth and true friendship to dark days.*

*And to the city of angels, which fed me with beauty and wilderness and
with the feeling that I had found my Inkworld.*

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An A–Z of the Inkworld

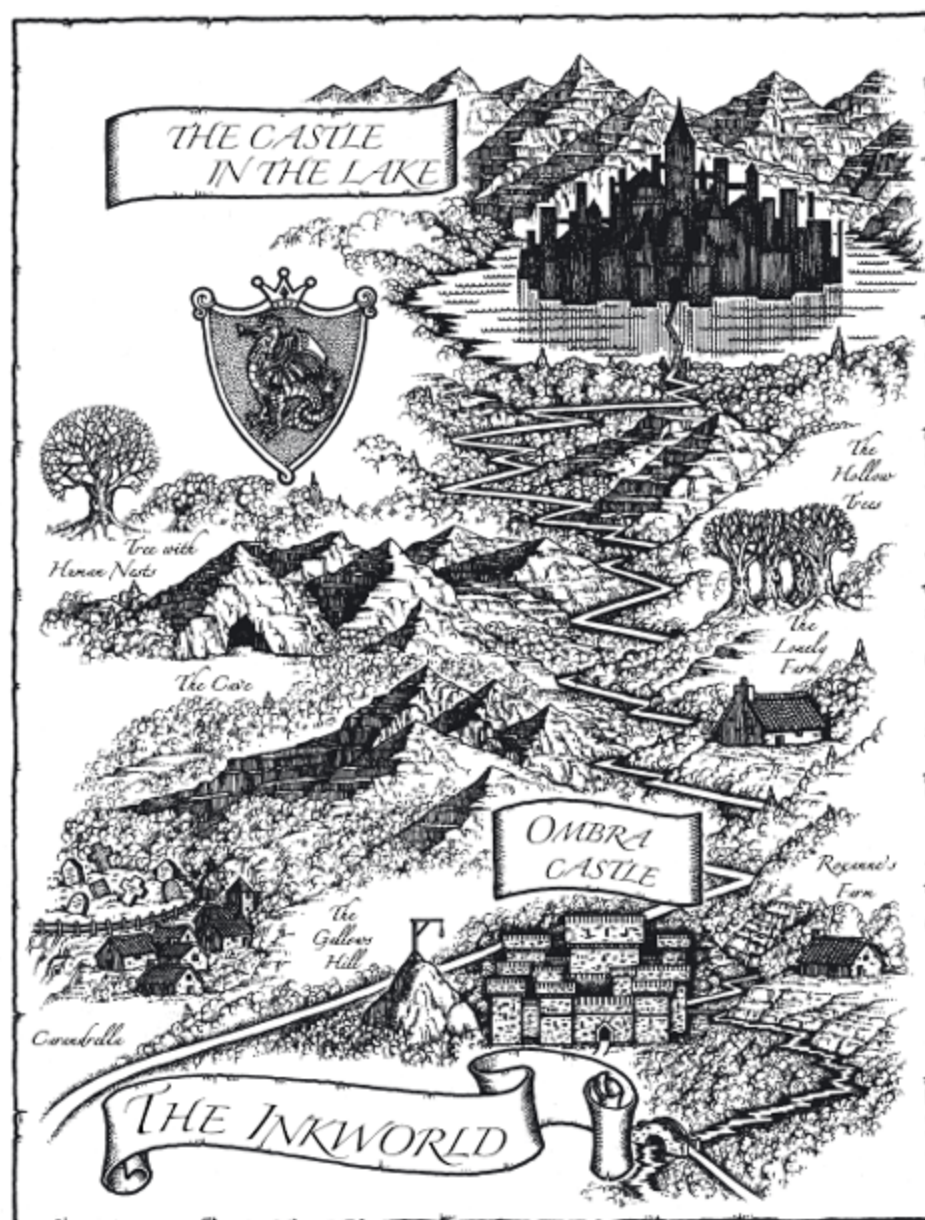
Acknowledgments

A note from the author:

Praise for *INKHEART*

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Inkheart

Mortimer Folchart (Mo), a bookbinder, has such a beautiful voice that it can bring characters out of books when he reads aloud. He discovered his dangerous gift by accident when he was reading a story called *Inkheart* to his wife Resa and daughter Meggie. Several characters, including the evil Capricorn and some of his followers, came out of it into our world – and Resa vanished into the world of the book. Meggie, only three at the time, can't even remember her mother.

Nine years later the fire-eater Dustfinger, one of the *Inkheart* characters and desperately homesick for his own world, visits Mo and Meggie (now twelve years old) to warn them that Capricorn is looking for all copies of the book to destroy them, so that no one can ever move between the two worlds again by reading from it. He is after the copy that Mo still has, and he also wants to force Mo to read treasure out of books for him.

Capricorn and his criminal gang have made an Italian village their headquarters, and when Dustfinger treacherously tells them where to find Mo, he is kidnapped and taken there. Meggie, her great-aunt Elinor (a book collector with a fine library) and the repentant Dustfinger join forces to rescue him. But they no longer have the book that might help Dustfinger to get home and Mo to find his wife at last. With a new friend – Farid, a boy read accidentally out of the *Arabian Nights* by Mo – they track down the author of *Inkheart*, old Fenoglio, but his own copies have also been stolen. Although a single copy is left, it is in the hands of Capricorn and his witch-like mother Mortola. After many more perilous adventures, Fenoglio and Meggie end up as captives back in Capricorn's village. Meggie, who has inherited her father's unusual talent, is to be made to

read Capricorn's ally, a terrible creature known as the Shadow, out of the remaining copy of Inkheart. But with the help of Fenoglio, who writes new words to add to the story, she and Mo turn the tables and Capricorn falls dead. Fenoglio himself disappears into the Inkworld in exchange for the Shadow. With Dustfinger's help Resa, who spent years in the Inkworld serving Capricorn and Mortola and lost her voice in passing between the two worlds, is found again. Reunited, the Folcharts all go home to Elinor's house.

Inkspell

At the end of *Inkheart*, Dustfinger went away with the only existing copy of Fenoglio's story – and with Farid, who wants to learn to be a fire-eater. Now, in *Inkspell*, Dustfinger has finally found someone to read him back to his own world: a petty criminal calling himself Orpheus who has a wonder-working voice like Mo's. Orpheus wants the book for himself, and reads Dustfinger into the Inkworld, but not his devoted apprentice Farid, who is left holding the book. Farid takes refuge with the Folcharts in Elinor's house. Meggie, longing to see the Inkworld too, discovers that she can read herself and Farid there. It is a place of marvels – fairies, water-nymphs, brownies – and when they meet a band of strolling players whose leader is known as the Black Prince, they are taken to the city of Ombra, capital of Lombrica, and find Fenoglio there. Ombra is in mourning for its ruling prince's son, Cosimo the Fair, killed by a gang of fire-raisers led by Firefox, one of Capricorn's men. And it is threatened by the ruler of the country of Argenta, known as the Adderhead, whose daughter Violante is Cosimo's widow. Near Ombra Dustfinger has been reunited with his wife Roxane, once a minstrel woman and now wise in herbal healing lore. But his daughter Brianna, Violante's maid, is hostile to him.

Back in our own world Orpheus has allies: Capricorn's mother Mortola and his henchman Basta, who turn up at Elinor's house. Orpheus is to read them – and Mo – into the Inkworld, where Mortola believes her son will still be alive. In her fury at finding that he is dead there too, she shoots and wounds Mo, to the horror of Resa, who grabbed his hand at the last moment and came into the Inkworld too. Resa nurses her husband devotedly, keeping away the White Women who visit those close to death. They meet the strolling players, who take

Mo for a famous robber known as the Bluejay. Left behind in our world, Elinor and her friend Darius, formerly reader to Capricorn, are still imprisoned in Elinor's house, while Orpheus lords it in her library.

Once again, Fenoglio and Meggie combine their talents for writing and reading aloud, this time in order to bring Cosimo the Fair back to life. But Cosimo's campaign against the Adderhead's forces ends in a disastrous defeat and many deaths. Fenoglio has lost control of his story, which now seems to be telling itself. Full of remorse, he vows never to write again. Mo and Resa have been captured and taken to the Castle of Night in Argenta, where Mo, with Meggie's help, is forced to bind a magic book to keep the Adderhead alive for ever. In return the Adderhead releases them, as agreed, but he sends soldiers after them and their friends: Dustfinger, the Black Prince and his men. Basta kills Farid in the fighting, and is killed himself by Mo. Dustfinger bargains with the White Women, daughters of Death, to take Farid's place and dies instead. Farid, alive again but distraught, persuades Fenoglio to write words for Meggie to read aloud that will bring Orpheus to the Inkworld, hoping that if he read Dustfinger home he can also read him back to life. And Orpheus arrives, clutching the single remaining copy of Inkheart. But was it safe to bring him here? And will Orpheus do what Farid wants ...?

Inkspell ends on this note of suspense. Now you can find out what happens to all the characters next in Inkdeath.

An A–Z of characters is at the back of the book.

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1

Nothing But a Dog and a Sheet of Paper

Hark, the footsteps of the night
Fade in silence long.
Quiet chirps my reading light
Like a cricket's song.

Books inviting us to read
On the bookshelves stand.
Piers for bridges that will lead
Into fairyland.

Rilke,
Sacrifice to the Lares, from Vigils III

Moonlight fell on Elinor's dressing gown, her nightdress, her bare feet, and the dog lying in front of them. Orpheus's dog. Oh, the way he looked at her with his eternally sad eyes! As if asking himself why, in the name of all the exciting smells in the world, she was sitting in her library in the middle of the night, surrounded by silent books, just staring into space.

'Why?' said Elinor in the silence. 'Because I can't sleep, you stupid animal.' But she patted his head all the same. This is what you've come to, Elinor, she thought as she hauled herself out of her armchair. Spending your nights talking to a dog. You don't even like dogs, least of all this one, with his heavy breathing that always reminds you of his appalling master!

Still, she had kept the dog in spite of the painful memories he brought back. She'd kept the chair too, even though the Magpie had sat in it. Mortola ... how often Elinor thought she heard the old woman's voice when she went into the quiet library, how often she seemed to see Mortimer and Resa standing among the bookshelves, or Meggie sitting by the window with a book on her lap, face hidden behind her smooth, bright hair ...

Memories. They were all she had left. No more tangible than the pictures conjured up by books. But what would be left if she lost those memories too? Then she'd be alone again for ever – with the silence and the emptiness in her heart. And an ugly dog.

Her feet looked so old in the pale moonlight. Moonlight! she thought, wiggling her toes in it. In many stories moonlight had magical powers. All lies. Her whole head was full of printed lies. She couldn't even look at the moon with eyes unclouded by veils of letters. Couldn't she wipe all those words out of her head and heart, and see the world through her own eyes again, at least once?

Heavens, Elinor, what a fabulous mood you're in, she thought as she made her way over to the glass case where she kept everything that Orpheus had left behind, apart from his dog.

Wallowing in self-pity, like that stupid dog rolling over in every puddle.

The sheet of paper that lay behind the glass looked nothing special, just an ordinary piece of lined paper densely written in pale-blue ink. Not to be compared with the magnificently illuminated books in the other display cases – even though the tracing of every letter showed how very impressed Orpheus was with himself. I hope the fire-elves have burnt that self-satisfied smile off his lips, thought Elinor as she opened the glass case. I hope the men-at-arms have skewered him – or, even better, I hope he's starved to death in the Wayless Wood, miserably and very, very slowly. It wasn't the first time she had pictured Orpheus's wretched end in the Inkworld to herself. These images gave her lonely heart more pleasure than almost anything.

The sheet of paper was already yellowing. To add insult to injury, it was cheap stuff. And the words on it really didn't look as though they could have spirited their writer away to another world right before Elinor's eyes. Three photographs lay beside the sheet of paper – one of Meggie and two of Resa – a photo of her as a child and another taken only a few months ago, with Mortimer beside her, both of them smiling so happily! Hardly a night went by when Elinor didn't look at those photographs. By now, at least, the tears had stopped running down her cheeks when she did so, but they were still there in her heart. Bitter tears. Her heart was full to the brim with them, a horrible feeling.

Lost.

Meggie.

Resa.

Mortimer.

Almost three months had passed since their disappearance. In fact, Meggie had even been gone a few days longer than her parents ...

The dog stretched and came trotting drowsily over to her. He pushed his nose into her dressing-gown pocket, knowing there were always a few dog biscuits in it for him.

‘Yes, all right, all right,’ she murmured, shoving one of the smelly little things into his broad muzzle. ‘Where’s your master, then?’ She held the sheet of paper in front of his nose, and the stupid creature sniffed it as if he really could catch Orpheus’s scent behind the words on the page.

Elinor stared at the words, shaping them with her lips. *In the streets of Ombra ...* She’d stood here so often over the last few weeks, surrounded by books that meant nothing to her; now she was once again alone with them. They didn’t speak to her, just as if they knew that she’d have exchanged them all on the spot for the three people she had lost. Lost in a book.

‘I *will* learn how, damn it!’ Her voice sounded defiant, like a child’s. ‘I’ll learn how to read them so that they’ll swallow me up too, I will, I will!’

The dog was looking at her as if he believed every word of it, but Elinor didn’t, not a single one. No, she was no Silvertongue. Even if she tried for a dozen years or more, the words wouldn’t make music when she spoke them. She’d loved words so much all her life. Although they didn’t sing for her the way they sang for Meggie or Mortimer – or Orpheus, damn him three times over.

The piece of paper shook in her fingers as she started to cry. Here came the tears again. She’d held them back for so long, all the tears in her heart, until it was simply overflowing with them. Elinor’s sobs were so loud that the dog cowered in alarm. How ridiculous that water ran out of your eyes when your heart hurt. Tragic heroines in books tended to be amazingly beautiful. Not a word about swollen eyes or a red nose. Crying always gives me a red nose, thought Elinor. I expect that’s why I’ll never be in any book.

‘Elinor?’

She spun round, hastily wiping her tears away.

Darius stood in the open doorway, wearing the dressing gown that she had given him for his last birthday. It was much too large for him.

‘What is it?’ she snapped. Where had that handkerchief gone this time? Sniffing, she pulled it from her sleeve and blew her nose. ‘Three months, they’ve been gone three months now, Darius! Isn’t that a good reason to cry? Yes, it is. Don’t look at me so pityingly with your owlish eyes. Never mind how many books we buy,’ she said, with a wide sweep of her arm towards her well-filled shelves, ‘never mind how many we get at auctions, swap or steal – not one of them tells me what I want to know! Thousands of pages, and not a word on any of them with news of the only people I want to know about. Why would I be interested in anything else? Theirs is the only story I want to hear! How is Meggie now, do you think? How are Resa and Mortimer? Are they happy, Darius? Are they still alive? Will I ever see them again?’

Darius looked along the books, as if the answer might after all be found in one of them. But then, like all those printed pages, he gave her no answer.

‘I’ll make you some hot milk and honey,’ he said at last, disappearing into the kitchen.

And Elinor was alone again with the books, the moonlight and Orpheus’s ugly dog.



2

Only a Village

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty
trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy
seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple
moor,
And the highwayman came riding –
Riding – riding –
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

Alfred Noyes,
The Highwayman

The fairies were already beginning to dance among the trees,
swarms of tiny blue bodies. Their wings caught the
starlight, and Mo saw the Black Prince glancing anxiously at

the sky. It was still as dark as the hills all around, but the fairies were never wrong. On a cold night like this, only the coming of dawn could lure them from their nests, and the village whose harvest the robbers were trying to save this time lay dangerously close to Ombra. As soon as daybreak came they must be gone.

A village like many others: only a dozen poor huts, a few barren, stony fields, and a wall that would hardly keep out a child, let alone a soldier. Thirty women without their menfolk, three dozen fatherless children. Two days ago the new governor's men had carried off almost the entire harvest of the neighbouring village. The robbers had reached the place too late, but something could still be salvaged here. They'd spent hours digging, showing the women how to hide livestock and provisions underground ...

The Strong Man was carrying the last hastily-dug sackful of potatoes, his rough-hewn face red with effort. It went the same colour when he was fighting or drunk. Between them all, they lowered the sack into the hiding place they had made just beyond the fields, and Mo covered the entrance with a network of twigs to hide the storage pit from soldiers and tax gatherers. By now, toads were croaking in the surrounding hills, as if to entice the day out, and the men on watch among the huts were getting restless. They'd seen the fairies too. High time to get away, back into the forest where a hiding place could always be found, even though the new governor was sending more and more patrols out to the hills. The Milksop, the widows of Ombra called him. A good nickname for the Adderhead's puny brother-in-law. But the Milksop's greed for what few possessions his new subjects had was insatiable.

Mo rubbed his eyes. Heavens, he was tired. He'd hardly slept for days. There were just too many villages that they might yet be able to reach ahead of the soldiers.

'You look worn out,' Resa had said only yesterday when she woke up beside him, unaware that he hadn't come to bed

beside her until the first light of dawn. He had said something about bad dreams, told her he'd been passing the sleepless hours by working on the book he was binding, a collection of her drawings of fairies and glass men. He hoped Resa and Meggie would be asleep again now when he came back to the lonely farmhouse that the Black Prince had found for them. It was east of Ombra, an hour's journey from the city on foot, and far from the land where the Adderhead still ruled, made immortal by a book that Mo had bound with his own hands.

Soon, thought Mo. Soon the book won't protect him any more. But how often had he told himself that before? And the Adderhead was still immortal.

A girl hesitantly approached Mo. How old would she be? Six? Seven? Her hair was as blonde as Meggie's, but it was a long time since Meggie had been so small. Shyly, she stopped a pace away from him.

Snapper emerged from the darkness and went over to the child. 'Yes, go on, take a good look!' he whispered to the little girl. 'That's really him – the Bluejay! He eats children like you for supper.'

Snapper loved such jokes. Mo bit back the words on the tip of his tongue. 'Don't believe a word he says!' he said, in a low voice. 'Why aren't you asleep like everyone else?'

The child looked at him. Then she pushed up his sleeve with her small hands until the scar showed. The scar of which the songs told tales ...

She looked at him, wide-eyed, with the same mixture of awe and fear he had now seen in so many faces. The Bluejay. The girl ran back to her mother, and Mo straightened up. Whenever his chest hurt where Mortola had wounded him, it felt as if he had slipped in there to join him – the robber to whom Fenoglio had given Mo's face and voice. Or had the Bluejay always been a part of him, merely sleeping until Fenoglio's world brought him to life?

Sometimes when they were taking meat to one of the starving villages, or a few sacks of grain stolen from the Milksop's bailiffs, women would come up to him and kiss his hand. 'Go and thank the Black Prince, not me,' he always told them, but the Prince just laughed. 'Get yourself a bear,' he said. 'Then they'll leave you alone.'

A child began crying in one of the huts. A tinge of red was showing in the night sky, and Mo thought he heard hoof beats. Horsemen, at least a dozen of them, maybe more. How fast the ears learnt to tell what sounds meant, much faster than it took the eyes to decipher written words.

The fairies scattered. Women cried out, and ran to the huts where their children slept. Mo's hand drew his sword as if of its own accord. As if it had never done anything else. It was the sword he had taken from the Castle of Night, the sword that once belonged to Firefox.

The first light of dawn.

Wasn't it said that they always came at first light because they loved the red of the sky? With any luck they'd be drunk after one of their master's endless banquets.

The Prince signalled to the robbers to take up their positions surrounding the village. It was only a couple of courses of flat stones, and the huts wouldn't offer much protection either. The bear was snorting and grunting, and here they came now out of the darkness: horsemen, more than a dozen of them with the new crest of Ombra on their breasts, a basilisk on a red background. They had not, of course, been expecting to find men here. Weeping women, crying children, yes, but not men, and armed men at that. Taken aback, they reined in their horses. They were drunk. Good – that would slow them down.

They didn't hesitate for long, seeing at once that they were far better armed than the ragged robbers. And they had horses.

Fools. They'd die before they realized that weapons and horses weren't all that counted.

‘Every last one of them!’ Snapper whispered hoarsely to Mo. ‘We have to kill them all, Bluejay. I hope your soft heart understands that. If a single man gets back to Ombra, this village will burn tomorrow.’

Mo merely nodded. As if he didn’t know.

The horses neighed shrilly as their riders urged them towards the robbers, and Mo felt it again, just as he had on Mount Adder when he had killed Basta – that coldness of the blood. Cold as the hoarfrost at his feet. The only fear he felt was fear of himself.

But then came the screams. The groans. The blood. His own heartbeat, loud and much too fast. Striking and thrusting, pulling his sword out of the bodies of strangers, the blood of strangers wet on his clothes, faces distorted by hatred – or was it fear? Fortunately you couldn’t see much under their helmets. They were so young! Smashed limbs, smashed human beings. Careful, watch out behind you. Kill. Fast. Not one of them must get away.

‘Bluejay.’

One of the soldiers whispered the name before Mo struck him down. Perhaps he had been thinking, with his last breath, of all the silver he’d get for bringing the Bluejay’s body back to Ombra Castle – more silver than he could ever take as loot in a whole lifetime as a soldier. Mo pulled his sword out of the man’s chest. They had come without their body armour. Who needed armour against women and children? How cold killing made you, very cold, although your own skin was burning and your blood was flowing fever-hot.

They did indeed kill them all. It was quiet in the huts as they threw the bodies over the precipice. Two were their own men, whose bones would now mingle with those of their enemies. There was no time to bury them.

The Black Prince had a nasty cut on his shoulder. Mo bandaged it as best he could. The bear sat beside them, looking

anxious. The child came out of one of the huts, the little girl who had pushed his sleeve up. From a distance she really did look like Meggie. Meggie, Resa ... he hoped they'd still be asleep when he got back. How was he going to explain all the blood if they weren't? So much blood ...

Sometime, Mortimer, he thought, the nights will overshadow the days. Nights of blood. Peaceful days – days when Meggie showed him everything she had only been able to tell him about in the tower of the Castle of Night. Nymphs with scaly skins dwelling in blossom-covered pools, footprints of giants long gone, flowers that whispered when you touched them, trees growing right up to the sky, moss-women who appeared between their roots as if they had peeled away from the bark ... Peaceful days. Nights of blood.

They did what they could to cover up the traces of the fight and left, taking the horses with them. There was a note of fear in the stammered thanks of the village women as they left. They'd seen with their own eyes that their allies knew as much about killing as their enemies did.

Snapper rode back to the robbers' camp with the horses and most of the men. The camp was moved almost daily. At present it was in a dark ravine that became hardly any lighter even by day. They would send for Roxane to tend the wounded, while Mo went back to where Resa and Meggie were sleeping at the deserted farm. The Prince had found it for them, because Resa didn't want to stay in the robbers' camp and Meggie too longed for a house to live in after all those homeless weeks.

The Black Prince accompanied Mo, as he so often did. 'Of course. The Bluejay never travels without a retinue,' mocked Snapper before they parted company. Mo, whose heart was still racing from all the killing, could have dragged him off his horse for that, but the Prince restrained him.

They travelled on foot. It meant a painfully long walk for their tired limbs, but their footprints were harder to follow than

a trail left by horses' hooves. And the farm must be kept safe, for everything Mo loved was waiting there.

The house, and the dilapidated farm buildings, always appeared among the trees as unexpectedly as if someone had dropped and lost them there. There was no trace now of the fields where food for the farm had once been grown, and the path that used to lead to the nearest village had disappeared long ago. The forest had swallowed everything up. Here it was no longer called the Wayless Wood, the name it bore south of Ombra. Here the forest had as many names as there were local villages: the Fairy Forest, the Dark Wood, the Moss-Women's Wood. If the Strong Man was to be believed, the place where the Bluejay's hide-out lay was called Larkwood. 'Larkwood? Nonsense,' was Meggie's response to that. 'The Strong Man calls everything after birds! He even gives birds' names to the fairies, although they can't stand the birds. Battista says it's called the Wood of Lights, which suits it much better. Did you ever see so many glow-worms and fire-elves in a wood? And all those fireflies that sit in the treetops at night ...'

Whatever the name of the wood, Mo was always captivated afresh by the peace and quiet under its trees. It reminded him that this, too, was a part of the Inkworld, as much a part of it as the Milksop's soldiers. The first of the morning sun was filtering through the branches, dappling the trees with pale gold, and the fairies were dancing as if intoxicated in the cold autumn sunlight. They fluttered into the bear's furry face until he hit out at them, and the Black Prince held one of the little creatures to his ear, smiling as if he could understand what its cross, shrill little voice was saying.

Had the other world been like this? Why could he hardly remember? Had life there been the same beguiling mixture of darkness and light, cruelty and beauty ... so much beauty that it sometimes almost made you drunk?

The Black Prince had the farm guarded by his men day and night.

Gecko was one of the guards today. As Mo and the Prince came through the trees he emerged from the ruined pigsty, a morose expression on his face. Gecko was always on the move. He was a small man whose slightly protuberant eyes had earned him his name. One of his tame crows was perched on his shoulder. The Prince used the crows as messengers, but most of the time they stole for Gecko from the markets; the amount they could carry away in their beaks always amazed Mo.

When he saw the blood on their clothes Gecko turned pale. But the shadows of the Inkworld had obviously left the isolated farm untouched again last night.

Mo almost fell over his own feet with weariness as he walked towards the well. The Prince reached for his arm, although he too was swaying with exhaustion.

‘It was a close shave this time,’ he said quietly, as if the peace were an illusion that could be shattered by his voice. ‘If we’re not more careful the soldiers will be waiting for us in the next village. The price the Adderhead has set on your head is high enough to buy all of Ombra. I can hardly trust my own men any more, and by this time even the children recognize you in the villages. Perhaps you ought to lie low here for a while.’

Mo shooed away the fairies whirring in the air above the well, then let the wooden bucket down. ‘Nonsense. They recognize you too.’

The water in the depths below shone as if the moon were hiding from morning there. Like the well outside Merlin’s cottage, thought Mo, as he cooled his face with the clear water and cleaned the cut that a soldier had given him on his forearm. All we need now is for Archimedes to fly up on my shoulder, while Wart comes stumbling out of the wood ...

‘What are you smiling at?’ The Black Prince leant on the edge of the well beside Mo, while his bear lumbered around, snuffling, on ground that was wet with dew.

‘A story I once read.’ Mo put the bucket of water down for the bear. ‘I’ll tell it to you sometime. It’s a good story, even though it has a sad ending.’

But the Prince shook his head, and passed his hand over his tired face. ‘If it ends sadly I don’t want to hear it.’

Gecko wasn’t the only man who had been guarding the sleeping farm. Mo smiled when Battista stepped out of the tumbledown barn. Battista had no great opinion of fighting, but Mo liked him and the Strong Man best of all the robbers, and he found it easier to go out at night if one of them was watching over Resa and Meggie. Battista still did his clown act at fairs, even when his audience had hardly a penny to spare. ‘We don’t want them forgetting how to laugh altogether!’ he said when Snapper mocked him for it. He liked to hide his pockmarked face behind the masks he made for himself: laughing masks, weeping masks, whatever he felt like at the time. But when he joined Mo at the well he handed him not a mask, but a bundle of black clothes.

‘A very good morning to you, Bluejay,’ he said, with the same deep bow that he made to his audience. ‘Sorry I took rather a long time with your order, but I ran out of thread. Like everything else, it’s hard to get in Ombra. But luckily Gecko here,’ he added, bowing in the man’s direction, ‘sent one of his black-feathered friends off to steal me a few reels from one of the market traders. Thanks to our new governor, they’re still rich.’

‘Black clothes?’ The Prince looked enquiringly at Mo. ‘What for?’

‘A bookbinder’s garments. Binding books is still my trade, or have you forgotten? What’s more, black is good camouflage by night. As for this,’ said Mo, stripping off his bloodstained shirt, ‘I’d better dye it black too, or I can’t very well wear it again.’

The Prince looked at him thoughtfully. ‘I’ll say it again, even though you don’t want to listen. Lie low here for a few days.

Forget the outside world, just as the world has forgotten this farm.'

The anxiety in his dark face touched Mo, and for a moment he was almost tempted to give the bundle back to Battista. But only almost.

When the Prince had gone, Mo hid the shirt and his bloodstained trousers in the former bakehouse, now converted into his workshop, and put on the black clothes. They fitted perfectly, and he was wearing them as he slipped back into the house just as the morning made its way in through the unglazed windows.

Meggie and Resa were still asleep. A fairy had lost her way in the gloom of Meggie's room. Mo lured her to his hand with a few quiet words. 'Will you look at that?' Snapper always used to say. 'Even the damn fairies love his voice. Looks like I'm the only person not to fall under its spell.'

Mo carried the fairy over to the window and let her flutter out. He pulled Meggie's blanket up over her shoulders, the way he used to on all those nights when he and she had only each other, and he glanced at her face. How young she still looked when she was asleep. Awake, she seemed so much more grown-up. She whispered a name in her sleep. Farid. Was it when you fell in love for the first time that you grew up?

'Where have you been?'

Mo spun round. Resa was standing in the open doorway, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

'Watching the fairies' morning dance. The nights are getting colder now. Soon they'll hardly leave their nests at all.'

It wasn't exactly a lie. And the sleeves of the black tunic were long enough to hide the cut on his forearm. 'Come with me, or we'll wake this big daughter of ours.'

He drew her with him into the bedroom where they slept.

'What kind of clothes are those?'

‘A bookbinder’s outfit. Battista made them for me. Black as ink. Suitable, don’t you think? I’ve asked him to make you and Meggie something too. You’ll be needing another dress soon.’

He put his hand on her belly. You couldn’t see it yet. A new child brought with them from the old world, although they had found out only in this one. It was barely a week since Resa had told him. ‘Which would you like,’ she’d asked, ‘a daughter or a son?’

‘Can I choose?’ he had replied, trying to imagine what it would be like to hold tiny fingers in his hand again, so tiny that they could scarcely grasp his thumb. It was just the right time – before Meggie was so grown-up that he could hardly call her a child at all.

‘The sickness is getting worse. I’ll ride over to see Roxane tomorrow. She’s sure to know what to do for it.’

‘Yes, she’s sure to know.’ Mo took her in his arms.

Peaceful days. Nights of blood.





3

Written Silver

To what was sombre he was most disposed
When, in his bare room with its shutters closed,
High-ceilinged, blue, he read his story, thinking,
And in his mind's eye picturing forests sinking
Under the water, seeing ochre skies,
Fleshy flowers in woods of stars before his eyes ...

Arthur Rimbaud,
The Poet at Seven Years Old

Of course Orpheus did none of the digging himself. He stood there in his fine clothes watching Farid sweat. He had made him dig in two places already, and the hole Farid was excavating now was already deep enough to come up to his chest. The earth was moist and heavy. It had rained a great deal these last few days, and the spade was useless. In addition,

there was a hanged man dangling right above Farid's head. The cold wind swung the body back and forth on its rotting rope. Suppose it fell, and buried him under its decaying bones?

Three more sombre figures swung from the gallows on Farid's right. Milksop, the new governor, liked hanging people. Folk said that he had his wigs made from the hair of executed men and women – and the widows in Ombra whispered that this was the reason why so many women had been condemned to hang.

'How much longer are you going to take? It's getting light! Go on, dig faster!' Orpheus snapped, kicking a skull down into the pit. Skulls lay beneath the gallows like terrible fruits.

It was true that day was beginning to dawn. Damn that Cheeseface! He'd had Farid digging almost all night long. If only he could wring the man's pale neck!

'Faster? Get your fine bodyguard to do some digging for a change!' Farid shouted up to him. 'Then his muscles would at least be some use!'

The Chunk folded his bulky arms and smiled down with derision. Orpheus had found the giant working for a physician in the marketplace, holding down the man's customers while he pulled out their rotten teeth. 'What on earth are you going on about now?' was all Orpheus had said, condescendingly, when Farid asked why he needed *another* servant. 'Even the rag-and-bone men in Ombra have bodyguards to protect them from the riffraff roaming the streets. And I'm a good deal richer than they are!' In this he was certainly right – and as Orpheus offered better pay than the physician, and the Chunk's ears hurt from listening to all those screams of agony, he went with them without a word. He called himself Oss, a very short name for such a large fellow, but it suited a man who spoke so seldom that at first Farid could have sworn he had no tongue in his ugly mouth. However, that mouth worked overtime at eating, and more and more frequently the Chunk would devour what

Orpheus's maids put in front of Farid too. At first Farid had complained, but after Oss lay in wait for him on the cellar steps one night he preferred to sleep on an empty stomach, or steal something from the marketplace. The Chunk had made life in Orpheus's service even worse. A handful of pieces of broken glass inside Farid's straw mattress, a leg stuck out to trip him up at the bottom of a staircase, a sudden rough hand grasping his hair ... he had to be on his guard against Oss all the time. There was no peace from him except at night, when the man slept outside Orpheus's bedroom, docile as a dog.

'Bodyguards don't dig!' Orpheus explained in a weary tone, pacing impatiently up and down between the holes Farid had dug. 'And if you go on dawdling like that we really will need a bodyguard. They're bringing two poachers here to hang before noon!'

'Well, there you are, then! I keep telling you: let's just look for buried treasure behind your house!' The hills where gallows stood, graveyards, burnt-out farms ... Orpheus loved places that sent a shiver down Farid's spine. Cheesehead certainly wasn't afraid of ghosts, you had to give him that. Farid wiped the sweat out of his eyes. 'You might at least write a more detailed description of *which* damn gallows the treasure's under. And why does it have to be buried so deep, for heaven's sake?'

'Why buried so deep? Why not behind my house?' Orpheus pursed his girlishly soft lips scornfully. 'What an original idea! Does that sound as if it belongs in this story? Even Fenoglio wouldn't fall for such nonsense. But why do I bother to keep explaining? You wouldn't understand anyway.'

'Oh no?' Farid drove his spade so deep into the damp soil that it stuck. 'Well, there's one thing I understand very well. While you're writing yourself treasure after treasure, acting the rich merchant and chasing every maid in Ombra, Dustfinger still lies among the dead!'

Farid felt tears come to his eyes yet again. The pain was as fresh now as it had been on the night when Dustfinger died for him. If he could only forget that still face! If he could only remember Dustfinger as he was in life! But he kept seeing him lying in the disused mine, cold and silent, his heart frozen.

‘I’m sick and tired of being your servant!’ he shouted up at Orpheus. In his fury he even forgot the hanged men, whose ghosts certainly wouldn’t like so much shouting in the place where they had died. ‘You haven’t kept your side of the bargain! Instead of bringing him back, you’ve made yourself as comfortable in this world as a maggot in a side of bacon. You’ve buried him, like all the others! Fenoglio’s right, you’re about as much use as a perfumed pig’s bladder! I’m going to tell Meggie to send you back again. And she’ll do it, just you wait and see!’

Oss looked enquiringly at Orpheus, his eyes asking permission to seize Farid and beat him black and blue, but Orpheus ignored him. ‘Ah, so we’re back to that subject!’ he said, barely able to control his voice. ‘The amazing, wonderful Meggie, daughter of an equally fabulous father who answers to the name of a bird these days, hiding out in the forest with a band of verminous robbers while ragged minstrels make up song after song about him.’

Orpheus adjusted his glasses and looked up at the sky, as if complaining to the powers above of Mo’s unearned fame. He liked the nickname those glasses had earned him: Four-Eyes. It was whispered with fear and horror in Ombra, which pleased Orpheus even more. And the glasses were regarded as evidence that all the lies he told about his origins were the plain truth: he came from beyond the sea, he said, from a distant land ruled by princes who all had two sets of eyes, which allowed them to read their subjects’ thoughts. He claimed to be a son of the king of that country, born out of wedlock, and said he’d had to flee after his own brother’s wife had fallen madly in love with him. ‘By the god of books, what a wretched story!’ Fenoglio had cried, when Farid told Minerva’s children about it. ‘The slushy

notions churning around in that fellow's mind! He hasn't a single fresh idea in his slimy brain – all he can do is mess about with other people's stories!

But while Fenoglio was spending his days and nights feeling sorry for himself, Orpheus had leisure to put his own stamp on this story – and he seemed to know more about it than the man who had originally made it up.

‘When you love a book so much that you read it again and again, do you know what it makes you wish?’ Orpheus had asked Farid, as they had stood outside the city gate of Ombra for the first time. ‘No, of course you don't. How could you? I'm sure a book only makes *you* think how well it would burn on a cold night. But I'll tell you the answer all the same: you want to be in the book yourself. Although certainly not as a poor court poet. I'm happy to leave that role to Fenoglio – though even there he cuts a sorry figure!’

Orpheus had set to work the third night after he arrived, in a dirty inn near the city walls. He had told Farid to steal him some wine and a candle, and had produced a grubby piece of paper and a pencil from under his cloak – and the book, the thrice-accursed book, *Inkheart*. His fingers had wandered over the pages collecting words, more and more words, like magpies in search of glittering baubles. And Farid had been fool enough to believe that the words Orpheus was so busily writing on his sheet of paper would heal the pain in his heart and bring Dustfinger back.

But Orpheus had very different ideas in mind. He sent Farid away before reading aloud what he had written, and before dawn the next morning ordered him to dig up his first treasure from the soil of Ombra, in the graveyard just beyond the infirmary. The sight of the coins had made Orpheus as happy as a child. But Farid had stared at the graves, tasting his own tears in his mouth.

Orpheus had spent the silver on new clothes for himself, hired two maids and a cook, and bought a silk merchant's magnificent house. Its previous owner had gone away in search of his son, who had ridden with Cosimo to Argenta and never came back.

Orpheus made out that he himself was a merchant, one who sold the granting of unusual wishes – and soon it had reached the Milksop's ears that this stranger with the thin fair hair and skin as pale as a prince's could supply bizarre things: spotted brownies, fairies as brightly coloured as butterflies, jewellery made of fire-elves' wings, belts set with the scales of river-nymphs, gold and white piebald horses to draw princely coaches, and other creatures previously known in Ombra only from fairy tales. The right words for all sorts of things could be found in Fenoglio's original book of *Inkheart* – Orpheus just had to fit them together in a slightly different way. Now and then one of his creations would die after taking only a few breaths, or would turn out vicious (the Chunk often had bandaged hands), but that didn't bother Orpheus. Why would he mind if a few dozen fire-elves died of starvation in the forest because they had no wings, or a handful of river-nymphs drifted dead in the water without their scales? He pulled thread after thread out of the fine fabric that Fenoglio had spun and wove patterns of his own, adding them to the old man's tapestry like brightly coloured patches, and growing rich on what his voice could entice out of another man's words.

Curses on him. A thousand and one curses. This was too much.

'I won't do anything for you any more! I won't do anything at all!' Farid wiped the moist earth from his hands and tried to climb out of the hole, but at a gesture from Orpheus Oss pushed him roughly back again.

'Dig!' he grunted.

‘Dig yourself!’ Farid was trembling in his sweaty tunic, though whether with cold or rage he couldn’t have said. ‘Your fine master is just a fraud! He’s already been in jail for his lies, and that’s where he’ll end up again!’

Orpheus narrowed his eyes. He didn’t like to have that chapter in his life mentioned at all.

‘I bet you were the sort who cons money out of old ladies’ pockets. And here you are all puffed up like a bullfrog, just because your lies are suddenly coming true. You suck up to the Milksop, because he’s Adderhead’s brother-in-law, and think yourself cleverer than anyone else! But what can you really do? Write fairies here who look like they’ve fallen into a vat of dye, chests full of treasure, and jewellery made of elves’ wings for him. But you can’t do what we brought you here for, you can’t do that. Dustfinger is dead. He’s dead. He – is – still – dead!’

And now here came those wretched tears again. Farid wiped them away with his dirty fingers, while the Chunk stared down at him as blankly as only someone can who doesn’t understand a word of what’s being said. And how could he? What did Oss know about the words Orpheus was collecting on the sly, what did he know about the book and Orpheus’s voice?

‘No one *brought* me here for anything!’ Orpheus leant over the edge of the pit as if to spit the words into Farid’s face. ‘And I certainly don’t have to listen to any lectures about Dustfinger from the boy who caused his death! Have you forgotten how he sacrificed himself for you? Why, I knew his name before you were even born, and I and no one else will bring him back, after you so drastically removed him from this story ... but how and when I do it will be my own decision. Now dig. Or do you think, you brilliant example of the wisdom of Arabia –’ Farid thought he felt the words slicing through him – ‘do you think I’ll be more likely to write if I can’t pay my maids and I have to wash my own clothes?’

Damn him. Damn him to hell. Farid bowed his head so that Orpheus wouldn't see his tears. *The boy who caused his death ...*

'Tell me why I keep paying minstrels good silver for their pitiful songs. Because I've forgotten Dustfinger? No. It's because you still haven't managed to find out how and where in this world I can speak to the White Women who have him now! So I go on listening to bad songs, I stand beside dying beggars, I bribe the healers in the infirmaries to call me when a patient is at death's door. Of course, it would be much easier if you could summon the White Women with fire, like your master, but we've tried that often enough and got nowhere, right? If at least they'd visit you, as it seems they like to visit those they've touched once with death already – but no! The fresh chicken blood I put outside the door was no use either, and nor were the children's bones I bought from a gravedigger for a bag of silver after the guards at the gate told you that was sure to raise a dozen White Women at once!'

Yes, yes! Farid wanted to put his hands over his ears. Orpheus was right. They'd tried everything, but the White Women simply didn't appear to them, and who else was to tell Orpheus how to bring Dustfinger back from the dead?

Without a word, Farid pulled his spade out of the ground and began digging again.

He had blisters on his hands by the time he finally struck wood. The chest he pulled out of the ground wasn't very large, but like the last one it was filled to the brim with silver coins. Farid had been listening when Orpheus read it there: *Under the gallows on the Dark Hill, long before the Prince of Sighs had the oaks there felled for his son's coffin, a band of highwaymen had buried a casket of silver in the ground. Then they killed each other in a quarrel, but the silver still lay there in the earth with their bones bleaching above it.*

The wood of the chest was rotten and, as with the other treasures he had dug up, Farid wondered whether the silver

might not have been lying under the gallows even *before* Orpheus wrote his words. If asked such questions Cheesehead would only smile knowingly, but Farid doubted whether he really knew the answer.

‘There you are! Now who’s talking? That ought to last another month.’ Orpheus’s smile was so self-satisfied that Farid would have liked to wipe it off his face with a spadeful of earth. Another month! The silver he and the Chunk were putting into leather bags would have filled the hungry bellies of everyone in Ombra for months to come.

‘How much longer is this going to take? The hangman’s probably already on his way with fresh gallows fodder.’ When Orpheus was nervous his voice sounded less impressive.

Without a word Farid tied up another bag full to bursting, kicked the empty chest back into the pit, and gave the hanged men one last glance. There had been a gallows on the Dark Hill before, but it was the Milksop who had declared it the main place of execution again. The stink of corpses drifted up to the castle too often from the gallows outside the city gate, and the stench didn’t go well with the fine dishes that the Adderhead’s brother-in-law ate while Ombra went hungry.

‘Have you found me some minstrels for this afternoon?’

Farid just nodded as he followed Orpheus, carrying the heavy bags.

‘The one you got me yesterday was ugly as sin!’ Orpheus got Oss to help him up on to his horse. ‘Like a scarecrow come to life! And most of what came out of his toothless mouth was the usual old stuff: beautiful princess loves poor strolling player, tralalala, handsome prince’s son falls in love with peasant’s daughter, tralalalee ... not a word about the White Women for me to use.’

Farid was only half listening. He didn’t think much of the strolling players any more. Most of them sang and danced for the Milksop these days, and they had voted the Black Prince out

of his position as their king because he was openly hostile to the occupying army.

‘All the same,’ Orpheus went on, ‘the scarecrow did know a couple of new songs about the Bluejay. It cost me a pretty penny to worm them out of him, and he sang them as quietly as if the Milksop in person were standing under my window, but one of them I’d really never heard before. Are you still sure Fenoglio isn’t writing again?’

‘Perfectly sure.’ Farid slung his rucksack on his back and whistled softly through his teeth, as Dustfinger always used to. Jink shot out from under the gallows with a dead mouse in his jaws. Only the younger marten had stayed with Farid. Gwin was with Roxane, Dustfinger’s wife – as if he wanted to be where his master was most likely to go if Death’s pale fingers really did give him up.

‘Just why are you so sure?’ Orpheus twisted his mouth in distaste as Jink jumped up on Farid’s shoulder and disappeared inside the rucksack. Cheeseface disliked the marten, but tolerated him, presumably because he had once belonged to Dustfinger.

‘Rosenquartz says he isn’t writing any more, and as Fenoglio’s glass man he should know, right?’

In fact, Rosenquartz was always complaining of his hard life now that Fenoglio was back in Minerva’s attic room, and Farid himself cursed the steep wooden staircase every time Orpheus sent him to question Fenoglio about things that Orpheus couldn’t find in his original book. *What lands lay south of the sea bordering Argenta? Is the prince who rules northern Lombrica related to the Adderhead’s wife? Where exactly do the giants live, or have they died out now? Do the predatory fish in the rivers eat river-nymphs?*

Sometimes Fenoglio wouldn’t even let Farid in after he’d toiled up all those stairs, but now and then he would have drunk so much that he was in a talkative mood. On those days

the old man overwhelmed him with such a torrent of information that Farid's head was spinning by the time he came back to Orpheus – who then questioned him all over again. It was enough to drive you crazy. But every time Orpheus and Fenoglio tried communicating with each other directly they started to quarrel within a few minutes.

‘Good. Excellent! It would complicate matters if the old man took to liking words better than wine again! His last notions led to nothing but hopeless confusion ...’ Orpheus picked up the reins and looked at the sky. It was going to be another rainy day, grey and dismal as the faces of the people of Ombra. ‘Masked robbers, books of immortality, a prince returning from the dead!’ Shaking his head, he rode his horse towards the path to Ombra. ‘Who knows what he'd have thought up next! Better for Fenoglio to drink away what few wits he has left. I'll see to his story myself. After all, I understand it a great deal better than he does.’

Farid had stopped listening as he dragged his donkey out of the bushes. Let Cheeseface talk away. Farid didn't care who wrote the words to bring Dustfinger back, just so long as he did come back in the end! Even if the whole wretched story went to hell in the process.

As usual, the donkey tried to bite Farid when he swung himself up on to its bony back. Cheeseface was riding one of the finest horses in Ombra. Despite his podgy figure, he was a good horseman – but of course, mean as he was, he'd bought only a donkey for Farid, a vicious animal so old that its head was bald. Even two donkeys couldn't have carried the Chunk, so Oss trotted along beside Orpheus like an overgrown dog, his face sweating with the effort of running up and down the narrow paths through the hills around Ombra.

‘Good. So Fenoglio isn't writing any more.’ Orpheus liked to think out loud. It sometimes seemed as if he couldn't put his ideas in order unless he heard his own voice at the same time. ‘But where do all the stories about the Bluejay come from,

then? The widows he protects, silver left on poor folk's doorsteps, poached meat on the plates of fatherless children ... is all that really Mo's own doing, or did Fenoglio write a few words by way of giving him a helping hand?'

A cart came towards them. Cursing, Orpheus turned his horse towards the thorny bushes, and the Chunk stared up with a silly grin at the two boys kneeling in the cart, hands tied behind their backs, faces pinched with fear. One of them had eyes even brighter than Meggie's, and neither of them was older than Farid. Of course not. If they'd been older they would have gone with Cosimo on the disastrous expedition against the Adderhead that got all the men killed, and they'd be dead by now too. But presumably that was no comfort to them this morning. Their bodies would be visible from Ombra, a dreadful example to all who were tempted by hunger to go poaching.

Did people die on the gallows too quickly for the White Women to come? Farid instinctively put his hand to his back, where Basta's knife had gone in. They hadn't come to him, had they? He didn't remember. He didn't even remember the pain, only Meggie's face when he regained consciousness, and how he had turned to see Dustfinger lying there ... 'Why don't you just write that they come and take me away instead of him?' he had asked Orpheus, who merely laughed out loud. 'You? Do you seriously think the White Women would exchange the Fire-Dancer for a rascally thief like you? No, we'll have to offer them tastier bait than that.'

The bags of silver jogged up and down beside Orpheus's saddle as he spurred his horse on, and Oss's face was so red with effort that it looked as if it would explode on his fleshy neck any moment now.

Curses on Cheeseface! Yes, Meggie had better send him back to his own world, thought Farid as he dug his heels into the donkey's sides. And the sooner the better! But who was going to write the words for her? And who but Orpheus could bring Dustfinger back from the dead?

He'll never come back, a voice whispered inside him. Dustfinger is dead, Farid. Dead.

So? he snapped back at the quiet voice. What does that mean in this world? I came back, didn't I?

If only he could remember the way.



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4

Ink-Clothes

It seems only yesterday I used to believe
there was nothing under my skin but light.
If you cut me I would shine.
But now when I fall upon the sidewalks of life,
I skin my knees. I bleed.

Billy Collins,
On Turning Ten

A new morning woke Meggie, with pale light that fell on her face, and air as fresh as if no one had ever breathed it before. The fairies were twittering outside her window like birds that had learned to talk, and a bluejay screeched somewhere – if it really was a bluejay. The Strong Man could imitate any bird's call so well that it sounded as if the real thing were nesting in his broad chest. And they all answered him:

larks, mockingbirds, woodpeckers, nightingales, and Gecko's tame crows.

Mo was awake too. She heard his voice outside – and her mother's. Could Farid have come at last? She quickly rose from the straw mattress she slept on (what had sleeping in a bed felt like? She could hardly remember) and went to the window. She'd been waiting for Farid for days. He had promised to come. However, she saw no one out in the yard but her parents and the Strong Man, who smiled at her when he saw her standing at the window.

Mo was helping Resa to saddle one of the horses that had been waiting in the stables when they first came here. The horses were so beautiful that they must once have belonged to one of the Milksop's high-born friends, but as with many of the things the Black Prince brought, Meggie tried not to think too much about how they fell into the robbers' hands. She loved the Black Prince, Battista and the Strong Man, but some of the others sent a shudder down her spine. Men like Snapper and Gecko, for instance, although the same men had rescued her and her parents on Mount Adder. 'Robbers are robbers, Meggie,' Farid often said. 'The Prince does what he does for other people, but several of his men just want to fill their pockets without having to toil in the fields or in a workshop.' Farid ... she missed him so much that she felt ashamed of it.

Her mother was looking pale. Resa had often been sick over the last few days. That must be why she wanted to ride over and see Roxane. No one knew what to do in such cases better than Dustfinger's widow, except perhaps for the Barn Owl, but he himself hadn't been particularly well since the death of Dustfinger, and especially since the Adderhead had burnt down the infirmary he'd run for so many years on the other side of the forest. No one knew what had become of Bella and all the other healers there.

A mouse, horned like Dustfinger's marten, scurried past as Meggie went outside, and a fairy whirled towards her and

snatched at her hair, but by now Meggie knew just how to shoo them away. The colder the weather, the fewer fairies ventured out of their nests, but they were still on the hunt for human hair. ‘Nothing keeps them warmer,’ Battista always said. ‘Except for bears’ hair, and it’s dangerous to pull that out.’

The morning was so cool that Meggie wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. The clothes the robbers had found for them weren’t as warm as the sweaters she’d have worn on a day like this in the other world, and she thought almost wistfully of the warm socks waiting for her in Elinor’s cupboards.

Mo turned and smiled as she came towards him. He looked tired but happy to see her. He wasn’t sleeping much. Often he would work late into the night in his makeshift workshop, using the few tools that Fenoglio had found him. And he was always going out into the forest, either alone or with the Prince. He thought Meggie didn’t know, but several times when she had been standing by the window unable to sleep, waiting for Farid, she had seen the robbers come for him. They called to Mo with the bluejay’s cry. Meggie heard it almost every night.

‘Are you feeling any better?’ She looked at her mother anxiously. ‘Perhaps it was those mushrooms we found the other day.’

‘No, it definitely wasn’t the mushrooms.’ Resa looked at Mo and smiled. ‘Roxane is sure to know a herb that will help. Would you like to come with me? Brianna might be there, she doesn’t work for Orpheus every day.’

Brianna. Why would Meggie want to see *her*? Because they were almost the same age? After Cosimo’s death and the massacre of Ombra’s menfolk, Her Ugliness had thrown Brianna out as a belated punishment for having favoured Cosimo’s company over hers. So Brianna had come home to help Roxane in the fields at first, but now she was working for Orpheus. Just like Farid. By this time Orpheus had half a dozen maids. Farid said sarcastically that Cheeseface didn’t even have to comb his

own thin hair any more. Orpheus hired only beautiful girls, and Brianna was very beautiful, so beautiful that beside her Meggie felt like a duck next to a swan. To make it even worse, Brianna was Dustfinger's daughter. 'So? I don't even speak to her,' Farid had said when Meggie asked about her. 'She hates me, just like her mother.' Still, he saw Brianna almost every day ... and all the others. And it was almost two weeks since he had been to see Meggie.

'Well, are you coming with me?' Resa was still looking enquiringly at her, and Meggie felt herself blushing as if her mother had overheard all her thoughts.

'No,' she said, 'no, I think I'd rather stay here. The Strong Man will be riding with you, won't he?'

'Of course.' The Strong Man had made it his business to protect Meggie and Resa. Meggie wasn't sure whether Mo had asked him to, or whether he simply did it to show his devotion to the Bluejay.

Resa let him help her up on to the horse. She often complained of the difficulty of riding in a dress, and how much rather she'd have worn men's clothes in this world. 'I'll be back before dark,' she told Mo. 'And maybe Roxane will have something to help you sleep better at night, too.'

Then she disappeared among the trees with the Strong Man, and Meggie was alone with Mo, just as she had been in the old days when there were only the two of them.

'She really isn't well!'

'Don't worry, Roxane will know what to do.' Mo glanced at the old bakehouse that he had made into his workshop. What were those black clothes he was wearing? Meggie wondered. 'I have to go out myself, but I'll be back this evening. Gecko and Battista are in the stables, and the Prince is going to send Woodenfoot to be here too while the Strong Man's gone. Those three will look after you better than I can.'

What was it she heard in his voice? A lie? He'd changed since Mortola all but killed him. He was more reserved, and often as abstracted as if part of him had been left behind in the cave where he almost died, or in the tower prison in the Castle of Night.

'Where are you going? I'll come with you.' Meggie felt him start nervously as she put her arm through his. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing, nothing at all.' He picked at his black sleeve and avoided her eyes.

'You've been out with the Prince again. I saw him in the farmyard last night. What happened?'

'It's nothing, Meggie. Really it isn't.' He stroked her hair, an absent expression on his face, then turned and made for the bakehouse.

'Nothing at all?' Meggie followed him. The doorway was so low that Mo had to bend his head. 'Where did you get those black clothes?'

'It's a bookbinder's outfit. Battista made it for me.'

He went over to the table where he worked. Some leather lay on it, a few sheets of parchment, some thread, a knife, and the slim volume into which he had bound Resa's drawings over the last few weeks: pictures of fairies, fire-elves and glass men, of the Black Prince and the Strong Man, Battista and Roxane. There was one of Farid too. The book was tied up as if Mo were taking it with him. The book, the black clothes ...

Oh, she knew him so well.

'No, Mo!' Meggie snatched the book away and hid it behind her back. He might be able to deceive Resa but he couldn't deceive her.

'What is it?' He was trying really hard to look as if he had no idea what she meant. He was better at pretending than he used to be.

‘You’re planning to go to Ombra to see Balbulus. Are you out of your mind? It’s far too dangerous!’

For a moment Mo actually considered telling her more lies, but then he sighed. ‘All right, I still can’t fool you! I thought it might be easier now you’re almost grown up. Stupid of me.’

He put his arms round her and gently removed the book from her hands. ‘Yes, I want to see Balbulus. Before the books you’ve told me so much about are sold. Fenoglio will smuggle me into the castle as a bookbinder. How many casks of wine do you think the Milksop can buy for a book? They say half the library’s gone already to pay for his banquets!’

‘Mo, it’s too dangerous! Suppose someone recognizes you?’

‘Who? No one in Ombra has ever seen me.’

‘One of the soldiers could remember you from the dungeon in the Castle of Night. And they say Sootbird’s in Ombra too! A few black clothes aren’t likely to deceive him.’

‘Oh, come on! When Sootbird last saw me I was half dead. And another encounter with me will be the worse for him.’ His face, more familiar to her than any other, suddenly became the face of a stranger – and not for the first time. Cold, chilly.

‘Don’t look at me like that!’ he said, smiling the chill away. But the smile didn’t linger. ‘Do you know, my own hands seem strange to me, Meggie.’ He held them out to her as if she could see the change in them. ‘They do things I didn’t even know they *could* do – and they do those things well.’

Meggie looked at his hands as if they were another man’s. She had so often seen them cutting paper, stitching pages together, stretching leather – or putting a plaster on her knee when she had cut it. But she knew only too well what Mo meant. She’d watched him often enough practising behind the farm outbuildings with Battista or the Strong Man – with the sword he had carried ever since they were in the Castle of Night. Firefox’s sword. Now he could make it dance as if his

hands knew it as well as a paperknife or a bone folder for the pages in a book.

The Bluejay.

‘I think I ought to remind my hands of their real trade, Meggie. I’d like to remind myself of it too. Fenoglio has told Balbulus that he’s found someone to repair and present his books as they deserve. But Balbulus wants to see this bookbinder before entrusting his works to him. That’s why I’m going to ride to the castle and prove that I know my craft as well as he knows his. It’s your own fault I can’t wait to see his workshop with my own eyes at last! Do you remember all you told me about Balbulus and his brushes and pens, up in the tower of the Castle of Night?’ He imitated her voice. *He’s an illuminator, Mo! In Ombra Castle! The best of them all. You should see his brushes, and his paints.*

‘Yes,’ she whispered. ‘Yes, I remember.’ She even remembered what he had replied: *I’d really like to see those brushes.* But she also remembered how afraid she had been for him back then.

‘Does Resa know where you’re going?’ She put her hand on his chest, where there was only a scar now as a reminder that he had almost died.

He didn’t need to answer. His guilty look said clearly enough that he hadn’t told her mother anything about his plans. Meggie looked at the tools lying on the table. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was time to remind his hands of their trade. Maybe he could also play that part in this world, the part that he’d loved so much in the other one, even if it was said that the Milksop considered books even more unnecessary than boils on the face. But Ombra belonged to the Adderhead. His soldiers were everywhere. Suppose one of them recognized the man who had been their dark lord’s prisoner a few months ago?

‘Mo ...’ The words were on the tip of Meggie’s tongue. She had often thought them over these last few days but never

ventured to speak them aloud, because she wasn't sure whether she really meant them. 'Don't you sometimes think we ought to go back? I do. Back to Elinor and Darius. I know I persuaded you to stay, but ... but the Adderhead is still looking for you, and you go out at night with the robbers. Maybe Resa doesn't notice, but I do! We've seen it all, the fairies and nymphs, the Wayless Wood and the glass men ...' It was so difficult to find the right words, words which could also explain to her what she herself was feeling. 'Perhaps ... perhaps it's time. I know Fenoglio isn't writing any more, but we could ask Orpheus. He's jealous of you anyway. I'm sure he'd be glad if we went away and left him the only reader in this story!'

Mo just looked at her, and Meggie knew his answer. They had changed places. Now he was the one who didn't want to go back. On the table, with the coarsely-made paper and the knives provided by Fenoglio, lay a bluejay's tail feather.

'Come here!' Mo perched on the edge of the table and drew her to his side, the way he had done countless times when she was a little girl. That was long ago, so long ago! As if it were in another story, and the Meggie in it was a different Meggie. But when Mo put his arm around her shoulders she was back in that story for a moment, feeling safe, protected, without the longing that now felt as if it had always lived in her heart ... the longing for a boy with black hair and soot on his fingers.

'I know why you want to go back,' said Mo quietly. He might have changed, but he could still read her thoughts as easily as his own. 'How long since Farid was last here? Five days? Six?'

'Twelve,' said Meggie in a miserable voice, and buried her face against his shoulder.

'Twelve? What a faithless fellow. Shall we ask the Strong Man to tie a few knots in his skinny arms?'

Meggie had to laugh. What would she do if someday Mo wasn't there any more to make her laugh?

‘I haven’t seen it all yet, Meggie,’ he said. ‘I still haven’t seen Balbulus’s books, and they matter the most. Handwritten books, Meggie, illuminated books, not stained by the dust of endless years, not yellowing and trimmed again and again ... no, the paint has only just dried on their pages, the bindings are supple. Who knows, maybe Balbulus will even let me watch him at work for a while. Imagine it! I’ve so often wished that I could see one of those tiny faces being painted on the parchment, just once, and the tendrils beginning to twine around an initial, and ...’

Meggie couldn’t help it, she had to smile. ‘All right, all right,’ she said, and put her hand over his mouth. ‘All right,’ she repeated. ‘We’ll ride to see Balbulus, but together.’

As we used to, she added in her thoughts. Just you and me. And when Mo was about to protest she closed his mouth again. ‘You said it yourself! Back in the disused mine.’ The mine where Dustfinger had died ... Meggie repeated Mo’s words in a soft voice. She seemed to remember every word that had been spoken in those days, as if someone had written them on her heart. ‘Show me the fairies, Meggie. And the water-nymphs. And the book illuminator in Ombra Castle. Let’s find out how fine his brushes really are.’

Mo straightened up and began sorting out the tools lying on the table, as he always used to in his workshop in Elinor’s garden.

‘Yes. Yes, I expect those were my words,’ he said, without looking at her. ‘But the Adderhead’s brother-in-law rules Ombra now. What do you think your mother would say if I put you in such danger?’

Her mother. Yes ...

‘Resa doesn’t have to know. Please, Mo! You must take me with you! Or ... or I’ll tell Gecko to tell the Black Prince what you’re planning. Then you’ll never get to Ombra!’

He turned his face away, but Meggie heard him laughing softly. ‘That’s blackmail. Did I teach you how to be a blackmailer?’

With a sigh, he turned back and looked at her for a long time. ‘Oh, very well,’ he said at last. ‘Let’s go to see the pens and brushes together. After all, we were together in the Adderhead’s Castle of Night. Ombra Castle can’t be so very dark by comparison, can it – although his brother-in-law rules it now?’

He stroked his black sleeve. ‘I’m glad bookbinders here don’t wear a costume as yellow as glue,’ he said, as he put the book of Resa’s drawings into a saddlebag. ‘As for your mother – I’ll fetch her from Roxane’s after we’ve been to the castle, but don’t tell her anything about our expedition. I expect you’ve guessed why she feels sick in the mornings, haven’t you?’

Meggie looked at him blankly – and then suddenly seemed to herself very, very stupid.

‘A brother or a sister? Which would you rather have?’ Mo looked so happy. ‘Poor Elinor. Did you know she’s been waiting for that news ever since we moved in with her? And now we’ve taken the baby away to another world with us.’

A brother or a sister. For a while, when Meggie was little, she had pretended she had an invisible sister. She used to make her daisy tea and bake sand cakes.

‘But ... how long have you two known?’

‘The baby comes from the same story as you do, if that’s what you mean. From Elinor’s house, to be precise. A flesh and blood child, not made of words, not made of ink and paper. Although ... who knows? Perhaps we’ve only slipped out of one story and into another. What do you think?’

Meggie looked around, saw the table, the tools, the feather – and Mo’s black clothes. Wasn’t all this made of words? Fenoglio’s words. The house, the farmyard, the sky above them, the trees, the rocks, the rain, the sun and the moon. Yes, what about us? Meggie thought. What are we made of? Resa, me, Mo

and the baby on its way. She didn't know the answer any more. Had she ever known it?

It seemed as if the things around her were whispering of all that would be and all that had been, and when Meggie looked at her hands she felt as if she could read letters there, letters saying: *and then a new child was born.*



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5

Fenoglio Feels Sorry for Himself

‘What is it?’ Harry asked shakily.

‘This? This is called a Pensieve,’ said Dumbledore. ‘I sometimes find, and I am sure you know the feeling, that I simply have too many thoughts and memories crammed into my mind.’

J.K. Rowling,
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Fenoglio was lying in bed, as he had so often in these last few weeks. Or was it months? It didn’t matter. Morosely, he looked up at the fairies’ nests above his head. They had all been abandoned except one, which poured out a constant stream of chattering and giggling. It shimmered in iridescent colours like a patch of oil on water. Orpheus’s doing! The fairies in this world were blue, for heaven’s sake! It said so in black

and white in his book. What did that idiot think he was doing, creating fairies in all the colours of the rainbow? And to make it even worse, the rainbow-coloured fairies drove away the blue ones wherever they went. Rainbow-coloured fairies, spotted brownies, and apparently there were some four-armed glass men around the place too. Fenoglio's head ached at the mere thought of it. And not an hour passed when he didn't think of it, and wonder what Orpheus was writing now in his fine big house, where he held court as if he were the most important man in Ombra!

Fenoglio sent Rosenquartz to spy on the place almost every day, but it couldn't be said that the glass man showed much talent for the job. Far from it. Fenoglio also suspected that Rosenquartz sometimes stole off to Seamstresses' Alley to chase glass women instead of going to Orpheus's house. Your fault, Fenoglio, he told himself grumpily, you should have written a little more sense of duty into their glass heads. Which is not, I am afraid, the only thing you omitted to do ...

He was reaching for the jug of red wine standing by his bed to comfort himself for this depressing fact when a small, rather breathless figure appeared at the skylight above. At last. Rosenquartz's limbs, usually pale pink, had turned carmine. Glass men couldn't sweat. They just changed colour if they'd been making a strenuous effort, another rule that Fenoglio himself had made, although with the best will in the world he couldn't now say why. But what did the foolish fellow think he was doing, clambering over the roof tops like that, with limbs that would smash if the stupid creature so much as fell off a table? A glass man certainly wasn't the ideal spy, but then again their small size made them very inconspicuous – and, fragile as their limbs were, their transparency undoubtedly came in useful on secret reconnaissance missions.

'Well, what's he writing? Come on, out with it!' Fenoglio picked up the jug and made his way over to the glass man barefoot. Rosenquartz demanded a thimbleful of red wine in

return for his spying activities, which – as he never tired of emphasizing– were not among the standard duties of a glass man, and thus called for extra payment. The thimble of wine wasn't too high a price, Fenoglio had to admit, but then so far Rosenquartz hadn't found out very much, and in addition the wine disagreed with him. It made him even more contrary than usual – and had him belching for hours on end.

‘Can't I even get my breath back before making my report?’ he snapped.

That was Rosenquartz for you: contrary. And always so quick to take offence!

‘You're breathing now, aren't you? And you can obviously talk as well!’ Fenoglio plucked the glass man off the thread that he had fastened to the skylight so that Rosenquartz could let himself down from it, and carried him over to the table. He'd exchanged his writing desk for it in the marketplace.

‘I repeat,’ he said, giving Rosenquartz his thimbleful from the wine jug, ‘what is he writing?’

Rosenquartz sniffed the wine and wrinkled his nose, which was now dark red. ‘Your wine is getting worse and worse!’ he observed in injured tones. ‘I ought to ask for some other kind of fee!’

Annoyed, Fenoglio removed the thimble from his glass hands. ‘You haven't even earned this one yet!’ he thundered. ‘Admit it, once again you haven't found anything out. Not the least little thing.’

The glass man folded his arms. ‘Oh, haven't I?’

It was enough to drive a man crazy. And you couldn't even shake him for fear of breaking off an arm, or even his head.

Looking grim, Fenoglio put the thimble back on the table.

Rosenquartz dipped his finger in and licked the wine off it. ‘He's written himself another treasure.’

‘What, yet again? For heaven’s sake, he gets through more silver than the Milksop!’ It always annoyed Fenoglio that he hadn’t thought of that idea himself. On the other hand, he’d have needed someone to read his words aloud and turn them into jingling coins, and he wasn’t sure whether Meggie or her father would have lent their tongues to something so prosaic. ‘Right. A treasure. What else?’

‘Oh, he’s certainly writing something, but he doesn’t seem very pleased with it. Did I tell you before that he has two glass men working for him now? You remember the four-armed one he was boasting of all over town?’ Rosenquartz lowered his voice as if his next words were too terrible to be spoken. ‘They say he threw him at the wall in a rage! Everyone in Ombra’s heard about it, but Orpheus pays well –’ Fenoglio ignored the glass man’s reproachful gaze as he made this remark – ‘so now he has these two brothers working for him, Jasper and Ironstone. The elder brother’s a monster! He—’

‘Two? What does that fool want two glass men for? Is he so busy mucking about with my story that one isn’t enough to sharpen his quills for him?’ Fenoglio felt anger turning his stomach, although it was good news that the four-armed glass man had come to grief. Perhaps it was beginning to dawn on Orpheus that his creations weren’t worth the paper he wrote them on.

‘Good. Tell me more.’

Rosenquartz said nothing. He had folded his arms with an injured expression. He didn’t like being interrupted.

‘Good God, don’t be so coy about it!’ Fenoglio pushed the wine a little closer to him. ‘What else is he writing? Exotic new prey for the Milksop to hunt? Horned lapdogs for the ladies at court? Or maybe he’s decided my world could do with some spotted dwarves?’

Rosenquartz dipped his finger in the wine again. ‘You’ll have to buy me new trousers,’ he remarked. ‘I tore these with all that

horrible climbing about. They're worn out anyway. It's all right for you to go around however you please, but I didn't come to live with humans just to be worse dressed than my cousins in the forest.'

There were days when Fenoglio would gladly have snapped the glass man in half. 'Trousers? Why would I be interested in your trousers?' he asked tartly.

Rosenquartz took a deep draught from the thimble – and spat the wine out on to his glass feet. 'Pure vinegar!' he said crossly. 'Did I get bones thrown at me for this? Did I make my way through pigeon droppings and over broken tiles for this? Don't look so sceptical. That Ironstone threw chicken bones at me when he caught me looking at Orpheus's papers! He tried to push me out of the window!'

Sighing, he wiped the wine off his feet. 'Very well. There was something about horned wild boar, but I could hardly decipher it, and then something else about singing fish – pretty silly stuff, if you ask me – and quite a lot about the White Women. Four-Eyes is obviously collecting everything the strolling players sing about them ...'

'Yes, yes, all Ombra knows! Did it take you so long just to find that out?' Fenoglio buried his face in his hands. The wine really wasn't much good. His head seemed heavier every day. Damn it!

Rosenquartz took another mouthful, even though he made a face as he swallowed it. That glass idiot! He'd have another bellyache by tomorrow, if not sooner. 'Well, never mind that. This is my last report!' he announced between belches. 'I'm never going spying again! Not as long as that Ironstone works there. He's as strong as a brownie, and they say he's already broken the arms off at least two glass men!'

'Yes, yes, all right. You're a terrible spy anyway,' muttered Fenoglio as he staggered back to his bed. 'Admit it, you're far

keener to chase the glass women in Seamstresses' Alley. Just don't think I don't know about it!'

With a groan, he lay down on his straw mattress and stared up at the empty fairies' nests. Was there any more wretched existence than the life of a writer who had run out of words? Was there a worse fate than having to watch someone else twist your own words, adding colourful touches – in very bad taste – to the world you'd made? No room in the castle for him now as court poet, no chest full of fine clothes, no horse of his own – no, he was back in the little room in Minerva's attic. And it was a marvel that she'd taken him in again, considering that his words and songs had made sure she had no husband now, and no father for her children. All Ombra knew what part Fenoglio had played in Cosimo's war. It was amazing they hadn't hauled him out of bed yet and killed him, but no doubt the women of Ombra had their hands too full keeping starvation at bay. 'Where else would you go?' was all Minerva had said when she opened her door to find him standing there. 'They don't need a poet up at the castle now. I suppose they'll be singing the Piper's songs in future.' And there, of course, she was right. The Milksop loved the silver-nosed man's bloodthirsty verses – when he wasn't composing a few poorly rhymed lines himself, all about his hunting prowess.

Luckily, at least Violante sent for Fenoglio now and then, never guessing, of course, that he brought her words stolen from poets in another world. But Her Ugliness didn't pay particularly well. The Adderhead's own daughter was poorer than the new governor's court ladies, so Fenoglio also worked as a scribe in the marketplace, which naturally had Rosenquartz telling anyone who would listen how low his master had sunk. But who paid any attention to a glass man's chirping little voice? Let the silly transparent fellow talk! Fenoglio had forsworn words for ever, no matter how invitingly Rosenquartz laid a blank piece of parchment on the table every evening. He was never going to write a single word again – except those he

stole from others, and the dry, bloodless twaddle he had to put down on paper or parchment for wills, sales agreements and similar stuff. The time for living words was over. They were deceitful, murderous, bloodsucking monsters black as ink and bringing nothing but misfortune. He wasn't going to help them do it any more, not he. A walk through the streets of Ombra, empty of men these days, and he needed a whole jug of wine to keep off the gloom that had deprived him of any zest for life since Cosimo's defeat.

Beardless boys, decrepit old men, cripples and beggars, travelling merchants who hadn't yet heard that there wasn't a copper coin to be made in Ombra now, or who did business with those leeches up in the castle – that was what you saw these days in the once lively streets. Women with eyes reddened from weeping, fatherless children, men from beyond the forest hoping to find a young widow or an abandoned workshop here ... and soldiers. Yes, there were plenty of soldiers in Ombra. They took what they wanted, day after day, night after night. No house was safe from them. They called it compensation for war crimes, and they had a point. After all, Cosimo had been the attacker – Cosimo, his most beautiful and innocent creation (or so, at least, Fenoglio had thought). Now he lay dead in a sarcophagus in the crypt beneath the castle. Minerva claimed that Violante went down there every day, officially to mourn her dead husband but really – so people whispered – to meet her informers. They said Her Ugliness didn't even have to pay her spies. Hatred of the Milksop brought them to her by the dozen. Of course. You had only to look at the fellow – that perfumed, pigeon-breasted hangman, governor only by the grace of his brother-in-law, the Adderhead. If you painted a face on an egg it would bear a striking resemblance to him. And no, Fenoglio hadn't made him up. Once again, the story had produced the Milksop entirely by itself.

As his first official act, he had ordered a document to be hung up by the castle gates, listing the punishments that would be meted out in Ombra for various crimes from now on – with pictures, so that those who couldn't read would know what threatened them too. The loss of an eye for this offence, the loss of a hand for that one, whippings, the pillory, branding, blinding. Fenoglio looked away whenever he passed that notice, and when he was out with Minerva's children he put his hand over their eyes if they had to cross the marketplace, where most of the punishments were inflicted (although Ivo always wanted to peek). Of course they could still hear the screams.

Luckily there weren't too many offenders left to be punished in this city without men. Many of the women had left with their children, travelling far away from the Wayless Wood that no longer protected them from the prince who ruled on the other side of it, the immortal Adderhead.

And yes, Fenoglio thought, that had undoubtedly been his idea. But more and more rumours were being heard all the time, whispering that the Adderhead took little pleasure in his immortality.

There was a knock at the door. Who could that be? Oh, the devil, was he forgetting everything these days? Of course! Where was the damn note that crow had brought yesterday evening? Rosenquartz had been scared to death when he'd suddenly seen the bird perching on the skylight. Mortimer was coming to Ombra. Today! And wasn't he, Fenoglio, supposed to meet him outside the castle gates? This visit was a reckless notion. There were 'Wanted' posters up for the Bluejay on every street corner. Luckily the picture on them wasn't in the least like Mortimer, but all the same ... Another knock.

Rosenquartz stayed where he was, beside his thimble. A glass man wasn't even any good at opening doors! Fenoglio felt sure Orpheus didn't have to open his door for himself. Apparently his new bodyguard was so large he could hardly get through the city gate. Bodyguard! If I ever do write again, thought

Fenoglio, I'll get Meggie to read me a giant here, and we'll see what the calf's-head has to say about that.

The knocking was getting rather impatient.

'Coming, coming!' Fenoglio stumbled over an empty wine jug as he looked for his trousers. Laboriously he climbed into them. How his bones ached! The hell with old age. Why hadn't he written a story in which people were young for ever? Because it would be boring, he thought as he hopped over to the door, one leg in the scratchy trousers. Deadly boring.

'Sorry, Mortimer!' he called. 'The glass man forgot to wake me up at the right time!'

Behind him, Rosenquartz began protesting, but the voice that replied to him outside wasn't Mortimer's – even if it was almost as beautiful as his. Orpheus. Talk of the devil! What did he want here? Come to complain that Rosenquartz had been in his house spying? If anyone has a reason to complain, I do, thought Fenoglio. After all, it's my story he's plundering and distorting! Miserable calf's-head, milkface, bullfrog, whippersnapper ... Fenoglio had many names for Orpheus, none of them flattering.

Wasn't it bad enough that he kept sending Farid to bother him? Did he have to come himself? He was sure to ask thousands of stupid questions again. Your own fault, Fenoglio! How often he'd cursed himself for the words he'd written in the mine at Meggie's urging: *So he called on another, younger man, Orpheus by name – skilled in letters, even if he could not yet handle them with the mastery of Fenoglio himself – and decided to instruct him in his art, as every master does at some time. For a while Orpheus should play with words in his place, seduce and lie with them, create and destroy, banish and restore – while Fenoglio waited for his weariness to pass, for his pleasure in words to reawaken, and then he would send Orpheus back to the world from which he had summoned him, to keep his story alive with new words never used before.*

‘I ought to write him back where he came from!’ Fenoglio growled as he kicked the empty jug out of his way. ‘Right now!’

‘Write? Did I hear you say write?’ Rosenquartz asked ironically behind him. He was back to his normal colour. Fenoglio threw a dry crust of bread at him, but it missed Rosenquartz’s pale pink head by more than a hand’s breadth, and the glass man gave a sympathetic sigh.

‘Fenoglio? Fenoglio, I know you’re in there! Open the door.’ God, how he hated that voice. Planting words in his story like weeds. His own words!

‘No, I’m not here!’ growled Fenoglio. ‘Not for you, calf’s-head!’

Fenoglio, is Death a man or a woman? Were the White Women once living human beings? Fenoglio, how am I to bring Dustfinger back if you can’t even tell me the simplest rules of this world? Enough of his questions. For God’s sake, who had asked him to bring Dustfinger back? If everything had gone the way Fenoglio had originally written it, the man would have been dead long ago in any case. And as for ‘the simplest rules’, since when, might he ask, were life and death simple? Hang it all (and there was more than enough hanging in Ombra these days anyway), how was he supposed to know how *everything* worked, in this or any other world? He’d never thought much about death, or what came after it. Why bother? While you were alive, why would death interest you? And once you were dead – well, presumably you weren’t interested in anything any more.

‘Of course he’s there! Fenoglio?’ That was Minerva’s voice. Damn it, the calf’s-head had roped her in to help him. Cunning. At least Orpheus was far from stupid.

Fenoglio hid the empty wine jugs under the bed, forced his other leg into his trousers, and unbolted the door.

‘So there you are!’ Minerva inspected him disapprovingly from his uncombed head to his bare feet. ‘I told your visitor you were at home.’ How sad she looked. Weary too. These days she

was working in the castle kitchen, where Fenoglio had asked Violante to find her a job. But the Milksop had a preference for feasting by night, so Minerva often didn't get home until the early hours of the morning. Very likely she'd drop dead of exhaustion some day and leave her poor children orphans. It was a wretched situation. What had become of his wonderful Ombra?

'Fenoglio!' Orpheus pushed past Minerva with that ghastly, innocent smile he always had ready as camouflage. Of course he'd brought notes with him again, notes full of questions. How did he pay for the fine clothes he wore? Fenoglio himself had never worn such clothes, not even in his days of glory as court poet. Ah, he thought, but you forgot the treasures he's writing for himself, didn't you, Fenoglio?

Without a word Minerva went down the steep staircase again, and a man made his way through Fenoglio's door behind Orpheus. Even ducking his head, he almost got stuck in the doorway. Aha, the legendary bodyguard. There was even less space in Fenoglio's modest little room with this huge meatball inside it.

Farid, on the other hand, didn't take up much space, although so far he had played a big part in the story. Farid, Dustfinger's angel of death ... he followed his new master through the door hesitantly, as if ashamed to be keeping such company.

'Well now, Fenoglio, I'm truly sorry,' said Orpheus, his supercilious smile giving the lie to his words, 'but I'm afraid I've found a few more inconsistencies.'

Inconsistencies!

'I've sent Farid here before with my questions, but you gave him some very strange answers.' Looking portentous, he straightened his glasses and brought the book out from under his heavy velvet coat. Yes, that calf's-head had brought Fenoglio's book with him into the world of the story it told: the

very last copy of *Inkheart*. But had he given it back to him, the author? Oh no. 'I'm sorry, Fenoglio,' was all he had said, with the arrogant expression that he had mastered so perfectly. (Orpheus had been quick to abandon the mask of a diligent student.) 'I'm sorry, but this book is mine. Or do you seriously claim that an author is the rightful owner of every copy of his books?' Puffed-up, milk-faced young upstart! What a way to speak to him, Fenoglio, the creator of everything around Orpheus himself, even the air he breathed!

'Are you after me again for information on death?' Fenoglio squeezed his feet into his worn old boots. 'Why? So that you can go telling this poor boy you'll bring Dustfinger back from the White Women, just to keep him in your service?'

Farid tightened his lips. Dustfinger's marten blinked sleepily on his shoulder – or was this a different animal?

'What nonsense you talk!' Orpheus sounded distinctly peeved – he took offence very easily. 'Do I look as if I have any trouble finding servants? I have six maids, a bodyguard, a cook and the boy. You know very well it's not just for the boy I want to bring Dustfinger back. He belongs in this story. It's not half as good without him, it's a flower without petals, a night without stars —'

'A forest without trees?' Fenoglio muttered.

Orpheus turned as red as beetroot. It was so amusing to make fun of the arrogant fop – one of the few pleasures Fenoglio still had left.

'You're drunk, old man!' Orpheus spat. His voice could sound very unpleasant.

'Drunk or not, I still know a hundred times more about words than you do. You trade at second-hand. You unravel whatever you can find and knit it up again as if a story were a pair of old socks! So don't you tell me what part Dustfinger ought to play in this one. Perhaps you remember I had him dead once already, before he decided to go with the White Women! What

do you think you're doing, coming here to lecture me about my own story? Take a look at that, why don't you?' Furiously, he pointed to the shimmering fairies' nest above his bed. 'Rainbow-coloured fairies! Ever since they built their horrible nest up there I've had the most appalling dreams! And they steal the blue fairies' stocks of winter provisions!'

'So?' Orpheus shrugged his plump shoulders. 'They look pretty, all the same, don't they? I thought it was so tedious for all fairies to be blue.'

'Did you, indeed?' Fenoglio's voice rose to such volume that one of the colourful fairies interrupted her constant chatter and peered out of her gaudy nest. 'Then write your own world! This one's mine, understand? Mine! I'm sick and tired of your meddling with it. I admit I've made some mistakes in my life, but writing you here was far and away the worst of them!'

Bored, Orpheus inspected his fingernails. They were bitten to the quick. 'I'm not listening to any more of this!' he said in a menacingly soft voice. 'All that stuff about "you wrote me here", "she read me here" – nonsense! I'm the one who does the reading and writing around here now. The only one. The words don't obey you any more, old man, it's a long time since they did, and you know it!'

'They'll obey me again! And the first thing I'll write will be a return ticket for you!'

'Oh yes? And who's going to read these fabulous words? As far as I'm aware, you need someone to read them aloud *for* you. Unlike me.'

'Well?' Fenoglio came so close that Orpheus's long-sighted eyes blinked at him in annoyance. 'I'll ask Mortimer! They don't call him Silvertongue for nothing, even if he goes by another name these days. Ask the boy! If it weren't for Mortimer, he'd still be in the desert shovelling camel dung.'

'Mortimer!' Orpheus produced a derisive smile, although with some difficulty. 'Is your head buried so deep in your wine jug

that you don't know what's going on in this world of yours? He's not doing any reading now. The bookbinder prefers to play the outlaw these days – the role you created especially for him.'

The bodyguard uttered a grunt, probably meant to be something like laughter. What a ghastly fellow! Had Fenoglio himself written him into the story, or had Orpheus? Fenoglio scrutinized the muscleman for a moment, irritated, and then turned back to his master.

'I did not make it especially for him!' he said. 'It's the other way round: I used Mortimer as my pattern for the character ... and from all I hear, he plays his part well. But that doesn't mean the Bluejay no longer has a silver tongue. Not to mention his gifted daughter.'

'Oh yes? And do you know where he is?' Orpheus asked almost casually. He was staring at his fingernails again, while his bodyguard had set to work on what was left of Fenoglio's breakfast.

'Indeed I do. He's coming—' Fenoglio fell abruptly silent as the boy suddenly came up and clapped his hand over the old man's mouth. Why did he keep forgetting the lad's name? Because you're going senile, Fenoglio, he said to himself, that's why.

'No one knows where the Bluejay is!' How reproachfully Farid's black eyes were looking at Fenoglio! 'No one!'

Of course. Damn drunken old fool that he was! How could he have forgotten that Orpheus turned green with jealousy whenever he heard Mortimer's name, or that he went in and out of the Milksop's castle all the time? Fenoglio could have bitten his tongue off.

But Orpheus smiled. 'Don't look so alarmed, old man! So the bookbinder's coming here. Bold of him. Does he want to make the songs that sing of his daring come true before they hang him? Because that's how he'll meet his end, like all heroes. We both know that, don't we? Don't worry, I don't intend to hand

him over ripe for the gallows. Others will do that. No, I just want to talk to him about the White Women. There aren't many who have survived a meeting with them, that's why I really would like a word with him. There are some very interesting rumours about such survivors.'

'I'll tell him if I see him,' replied Fenoglio brusquely. 'But I can't think that he will want to talk to you. After all, I don't suppose he'd ever have met the White Women at all if you hadn't been so willing to read him here for Mortola. Rosenquartz!' He strode to the door with as much dignity as was possible in his shabby boots. 'I have some errands to run. See our guests out, and mind you keep away from that marten!'

Fenoglio stumbled down the staircase to the yard almost as fast as he had on the day when Basta had paid him a visit. Mortimer would be waiting outside the castle gates already! Suppose Orpheus found him there when he went to the castle to tell the Milksop what he had heard? The Bluejay was the Governor's mortal enemy.

The boy caught up with him halfway downstairs. Farid. Yes, that was the name. Of course. Going senile, for sure

'Is Silvertongue really coming here?' he whispered breathlessly. 'Don't worry, Orpheus won't give him away. Not yet! But Ombra is far too dangerous for him! Is he bringing Meggie with him?'

'Farid!' Orpheus was looking down at them from the top of the stairs as if he were the king of the Inkworld. 'If the old fool doesn't tell Mortimer I want to speak to him, then you do it. Understand?'

Old fool, thought Fenoglio. Oh, ye gods of words, give them back to me so that I can get this damned calf's-head out of my story!

He wanted to give Orpheus a suitably cutting answer, but not even his tongue could find the right words now, and the boy impatiently hauled him away.



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6

Sad Ombra

My courtiers called me the happy prince, and happy indeed I was, if pleasure be happiness. So I lived and so I died. And now that I am dead they have set me high that I can see all the ugliness and all the misery in the city, and though my heart is made of lead yet I cannot choose but weep.

Oscar Wilde,
The Happy Prince

Farid had told Meggie how difficult it was to get into Ombra now, and she had passed on everything he said to Mo. ‘The guards aren’t the harmless fools who used to stand there. If they ask you what you are doing in Ombra, think hard before you answer. Whatever they demand, you must stay humble and

submissive. They don't search many people. Sometimes you may even be lucky and they'll just wave you through!'

They weren't lucky. The guards stopped them, and Meggie felt like clinging to Mo when one of the soldiers gestured to him to dismount and brusquely asked to see a sample of his craft. While the guard looked at the book of her mother's drawings, Meggie wondered in alarm whether she already knew the face under the open helmet from her imprisonment in the Castle of Night, and whether he would find the knife hidden in Mo's belt. They might kill him just for that knife. No one was allowed to carry weapons except the occupiers from Argenta, but Battista had made the belt so well that even the suspicious hands of the guard at the gate could find nothing wrong with it.

Meggie was glad Mo had the knife with him as they rode through the ironbound gates, past the lances of the guards, and into the city that now belonged to the Adderhead.

She hadn't been in Ombra since she and Dustfinger first set out for the secret camp of the Motley Folk. It seemed an eternity ago that she had run through the streets with Resa's letter telling her that Mortola had shot her father. For a moment she pressed her face against Mo's back, so happy that he was back with her, alive and well. At last she would be able to show him what she'd told him so much about: Balbulus's workshop and the Laughing Prince's books. For one precious moment she forgot all her fears, and it seemed as if the Inkworld belonged only to him and her.

Mo liked Ombra. Meggie could see it in his face, from the way he looked around, reining in his horse again and again to look down the streets. Although it was impossible to ignore the mark left on the city by the occupying forces, Ombra was still what the stonemasons had made of it when they first carved its gates, columns and arches. Their works of art couldn't be carried away and broken up – for then they'd be worth no more than the paving stones in the street. So stone flowers still grew under the windows and balconies of Ombra, tendrils twined

around columns and cornices, and faces stuck tongues out of grotesquely distorted mouths from the sand-coloured walls, weeping stony tears. But the Laughing Prince's coat of arms was defaced everywhere, and you could recognize the lion on it only from what was left of its mane.

'The street on the right leads to the marketplace!' Meggie whispered to Mo, and he nodded like a sleepwalker. Very likely he was hearing, in his mind, the words that had once told him about the scene now surrounding him as he rode on. Meggie had heard about the Inkworld only from her mother, but Mo had read Fenoglio's book countless times as he tried again and again to find Resa among the words.

'Is it the way you imagined it?' she asked him quietly.

'Yes,' Mo whispered back. 'Yes – and no.'

There was a crowd of people in the marketplace, just as if the peace-loving Laughing Prince still ruled Ombra – except that there were hardly any men to be seen, and you could stop and watch entertainers again. For the Milksop allowed strolling players into the city, although only – it was whispered – if they were prepared to spy for him. Mo rode his horse past a crowd of children. There were many children in Ombra, even though their fathers were dead. Meggie saw a torch whirling through the air above the small heads – two, three, four torches – and sparks fading and going out in the cold air. Farid? she wondered, although she knew he'd done no more fire-eating since Dustfinger's death. But Mo suddenly pulled his hood down over his forehead, and then she too saw the familiar well-oiled face with its constant smile.

Sootbird.

Meggie's fingers closed on Mo's cloak, but her father rode on, as if the man who had betrayed him once already wasn't there at all. More than a dozen strolling players had lost their lives because Sootbird had revealed the whereabouts of the secret camp, and Mo himself had almost been among the dead.

Everyone in Lombrica knew that Sootbird went in and out of the Castle of Night, that he'd been paid for his treachery in silver by the Piper himself and was now also on excellent terms with the Milksop, yet there he stood in Ombra marketplace, smiling, unrivalled now that Dustfinger was dead and Farid had lost his enthusiasm for fire-eating.

Oh yes, Ombra certainly had new masters. Nothing could have made that clearer to Meggie than Sootbird's smug, masklike face. It was said that the Adderhead's alchemists had taught him certain things, and that what he played with now was dark fire, wily and deadly like the powders he used to tame it. The Strong Man had told Meggie that its smoke beguiled the senses, making Sootbird's spectators think they were watching the greatest fire-eater on earth.

Whatever the truth of that was, the children of Ombra clapped. The torches didn't fly half as high in the air as they had for Dustfinger or Farid, but for a while the show made them forget their sad mothers, and the work waiting at home.

'Mo, please!' Meggie quickly turned her face away as Sootbird looked in her direction. 'Let's turn back! Suppose he recognizes you?'

They were going to close the gates, then the two of them would be hunted through the streets like rats in a trap!

But Mo just shook his head very slightly as he reined in his horse behind one of the market stalls. 'Don't worry, Sootbird is far too busy keeping the fire away from his pretty face!' he whispered to Meggie. 'But let's dismount. We won't be so conspicuous on foot.'

The horse shied when Mo led it into the crowd, but he soothed it in a quiet voice. Meggie saw a juggler who had once followed the Black Prince among the stalls. Many of the strolling players had changed sides now that the Milksop was filling their pockets. These were not bad times for them, and the market traders did good business too. The women of Ombra

couldn't afford any of the wares for sale, but with the money they had extorted the Milksop and his friends bought costly fabrics, jewellery, weapons, and delicacies with names that Fenoglio himself might not know. You could even buy horses here.

Mo looked around at the bustling, colourful throng as if he didn't want to miss a single face or any of the wares offered for sale, but finally his gaze turned to the towers rising high above the tiled roof tops, and lingered there. Meggie's heart constricted. He was still determined to go to the castle, and she cursed herself for ever telling him about Balbulus and his art.

She almost stopped breathing when they passed a 'Wanted' poster for the Bluejay, but Mo just cast a glance of amusement at the picture and ran his hand through his dark hair, which he now wore short like a peasant. Perhaps he thought his carefree attitude would soothe Meggie, but it didn't. It frightened her. When he acted like that he was the Bluejay, a stranger with her father's face.

Suppose one of the soldiers who had guarded him in the Castle of Night was here? Wasn't that one staring at them? And the minstrel woman over there – didn't she look like one of the women who had gone out through the gates of the Castle of Night with them? *Move away, Mo!* she thought, willing him to walk on with her through one of the arches, into a street – any street – just to be out of sight of all those eyes. Two children clutched her skirt and held out their dirty hands, begging. Meggie smiled at them helplessly. She didn't have any money, not a coin. How hungry they looked! A soldier made his way through the crush and roughly pushed the beggar children aside. If only we were in there with Balbulus, thought Meggie – and stumbled into Mo as he abruptly stopped.

Beside the stall of a physician who was praising his miracle medicine at the top of his voice, a few boys were standing around a pillory. There was a woman in it, her hands and head wedged in the wood, helpless as a doll. Rotting vegetables stuck

to her face and hands, fresh dung, anything the children could find among the stalls.

Meggie had seen such things before, in Fenoglio's company, but Mo stood there as if he had forgotten what he'd come to Ombra for. He was almost as pale as the woman, whose tears mingled with the dirt on her face, and for a moment Meggie was afraid he was going to reach for the knife hidden in his belt.

'Mo!' She took his arm and quickly led him on, away from the gawping children who were already turning to look at him, and into the street going up to the castle.

'Have you seen anything like that before?' The way he was looking at her! As if he couldn't believe she had been able to control herself so well at such a sight.

His glance made Meggie feel ashamed. 'Yes,' she said awkwardly. 'Yes, a few times. They put people in the pillory during the Laughing Prince's rule too.'

Mo was still looking at her. 'Don't tell me you can get used to such sights.'

Meggie bent her head. The answer was yes. Yes, you could.

Mo took a deep breath, as if he had forgotten about breathing when he saw the weeping woman. Then he walked on in silence. He didn't say a word until they reached the castle forecourt.

There was another pillory right beside the castle gates, with a boy in it. Fire-elves had settled on his bare skin. Mo handed Meggie the horse's reins before she could stop him, and went over to the boy. Ignoring the guards at the gateway, who were staring at him, and the women passing by who turned their heads away in alarm, he shooed the fire-elves off the boy's skinny arms. The boy just looked at him incredulously. There was nothing to be seen on his face but fear, fear and shame. And Meggie remembered a story that Farid had told her, of how Dustfinger and the Black Prince had once been in the pillory

together, side by side, when they were not much older than the lad now looking at his protector in such alarm.

‘Mortimer!’

Meggie recognized the old man dragging Mo away from the pillory only after a second glance. Fenoglio’s grey hair came almost down to his shoulders; his eyes were bloodshot, his face unshaven. He looked old – Meggie had never considered Fenoglio old before, but now it was all she could think of.

‘Are you out of your mind?’ he snapped at her father in a low voice. ‘Hello, Meggie,’ he added abstractedly, and Meggie felt the blood shoot into her face as Farid appeared behind him.

Farid.

Keep very cool, she thought, but a smile had already stolen to her lips. Make it go away! But how, when it was so good to see his face? Jink was sitting on his shoulder, and sleepily flicked his tail when he saw her.

‘Hello, Meggie. How are you?’ Farid stroked the marten’s bushy coat.

Twelve days. Not a sign of life from him for twelve whole days. Hadn’t she firmly resolved not to say a word when she saw him again? But she just couldn’t be angry with him. He still looked so sad. Not a sign of the laughter that once used to be as much a part of his face as his black eyes. The smile he gave her now was only a sad shadow of it.

‘I’ve been wanting to come and see you so often, but Orpheus just wouldn’t let me go out!’ He was hardly listening to his own words. He had eyes only for Meggie’s father. The Bluejay.

Farid had led Mo away with him – away from the pillory, away from the soldiers. Meggie followed them. The horse was restless, but Farid calmed it. Dustfinger had taught him how to talk to animals. He was close beside Meggie, so near and yet so far away.

‘What was the idea of that?’ Fenoglio was still holding Mo firmly, as if afraid he might go back to the pillory. ‘Do you want to put your own head in that thing too? Or – no, very likely they’d impale it on a pike right away!’

‘Those are fire-elves, Fenoglio! They’ll burn his skin.’ Mo’s voice was husky with rage.

‘You think I don’t know that? I invented the little brutes. The boy will survive. I imagine he’s a thief. I don’t want to know any more.’

Mo moved away, turning his back on Fenoglio as abruptly as if to keep himself from striking the old man. He scrutinized the guards and their weapons, the castle walls and the pillory, as if trying to think of a way to make them all disappear. Don’t look at the guards, Mo! Meggie thought. That was the first thing Fenoglio had taught her in this world: not to look any soldier in the eye – any soldier, any nobleman – anyone who was allowed to carry a weapon.

‘Shall I spoil their appetite for his skin, Silvertongue?’ Farid came up between Mo and Fenoglio.

Jink spat at the old man, as if detecting him as the cause of all that was wrong in his world. Without waiting for Mo’s answer Farid went up to the pillory, where the elves had settled on the boy’s skin again. With a snap of his fingers he sent sparks flying to singe their shimmering wings and send them swirling through the air and away, with an angry buzz. One of the guards picked up his lance, but before he could move Farid painted a fiery basilisk on the castle wall with his finger, bowed to the guards – who were staring incredulously at their master’s burning emblem – and strolled back casually to Mo’s side.

‘Very audacious, dear boy!’ growled Fenoglio disapprovingly, but Farid took no notice of him.

‘Why did you come here, Silvertongue?’ he asked, lowering his voice. ‘This is dangerous!’ But his eyes were shining. Farid

loved dangerous ventures, and he loved Mo for being the Bluejay.

‘I want to look at some books.’

‘Books?’ Farid was so bewildered that Mo couldn’t help smiling.

‘Yes, books. Very special books.’ He looked up at the tallest of the castle towers. Meggie had told him exactly where Balbulus had his workshop.

‘What’s Orpheus up to?’ Mo glanced at the guards. At this moment they were searching a butcher’s deliveries – though what for they didn’t seem to know. ‘I’ve heard he’s growing richer and richer.’

‘Yes, he is.’ Farid’s hand stroked Meggie’s back. When Mo was with them he always confined himself to caresses that weren’t too obvious. Farid felt great respect for fathers. But Meggie’s rosy blush certainly didn’t escape Mo’s attention. ‘He’s growing richer, but he hasn’t written anything to rescue Dustfinger yet! He thinks of nothing but his treasures, and what he can sell to the Milksop: wild boar with horns, golden lapdogs, spider moths, leaf men, anything else he can dream up.’

‘Spider moths? Leaf men?’ Fenoglio looked at Farid in alarm, but Farid didn’t seem to notice.

‘Orpheus wants to talk to you!’ he whispered to Mo. ‘About the White Women. Please do meet him! Maybe you know something that could help him to bring Dustfinger back!’

Meggie saw the pity in Mo’s face. He didn’t believe Dustfinger would ever come back, any more than she did. ‘Nonsense,’ he said as his hand instinctively went to the place where Mortola had wounded him. ‘I don’t know anything. Anything more than everyone knows.’

The guards had let the butcher pass, and one of them was staring at Mo again. The basilisk painted by Farid on the stones

was still burning on the castle walls.

Mo turned his back on the soldier. 'Listen!' he whispered to Meggie. 'I ought not to have brought you here. Suppose you stay with Farid while I go to see Balbulus? He can take you to Roxane's, and I'll meet you and Resa there.'

Farid put his arm round Meggie's shoulders. 'Yes, you go. I'll look after her.'

But Meggie pushed his arm roughly away. She didn't like the idea of Mo going on his own – although she had to admit she'd have been only too happy to stay with Farid. She'd missed his face so much.

'Look after me? You don't have to look after me!' she snapped at him, more sharply than she had intended. Being in love made you so stupid!

'She's right about that. No one has to look after Meggie.' Mo gently took the horse's reins from her hand. 'Now that I come to think of it, she's looked after me more often than the other way round. I'll soon be back,' he told her. 'I promise. And not a word to your mother, all right?'

Meggie just nodded.

'Stop looking at me so anxiously!' Mo whispered in a conspiratorial tone. 'Don't the songs say the Bluejay hardly ever does anything without his beautiful daughter? So I'm much less of a suspicious character without you!'

'Yes, but the songs are lying,' Meggie whispered back. 'The Bluejay doesn't have a daughter at all. He's not my father, he's a robber.'

Mo looked at her for a long moment. Then he kissed her on the forehead as if obliterating what she had said, and went slowly towards the castle with Fenoglio.

Meggie never took her eyes off him as he reached the guards and stopped. In his black clothes he really did look like a stranger – the bookbinder from a foreign land who had come all

this way to see the famous Balbulus's pictures and give them proper clothes to wear at last. Who cared that he'd also become a robber on his long journey?

Farid took Meggie's hand as soon as Mo had turned his back to them. 'Your father's as brave as a lion,' he whispered to her, 'but a little crazy too, if you ask me. If I were the Bluejay I'd never go through that gate, certainly not to see a few books!'

'You don't understand,' replied Meggie quietly. 'He wouldn't do it for anything *except* the books.'

She was wrong about that, but she wouldn't know it until later.

The soldiers let the writer and the bookbinder pass. Mo looked back at Meggie once more before he disappeared through the great gateway with its pointed iron portcullis. Ever since the Milksop had come to the castle it was lowered as soon as darkness fell, or whenever an alarm bell rang inside the building. Meggie had heard the sound once, and she instinctively expected to hear it again as Mo disappeared inside those mighty walls: the ringing of bells, the rattle of chains as the portcullis dropped, the sound of the iron spikes meeting the ground ...

'Meggie?' Farid put one hand under her chin and turned her face to his. 'You must believe me – I'd have come to see you ages ago, but Orpheus makes me work hard all day, and at night I steal out to Roxane's farm. I know she goes to the place where she's hidden Dustfinger almost every night! But she always catches me before I can follow her. Her stupid goose lets me bribe it with raisin bread, but if the linchetto in her stable doesn't bite me then Gwin gives me away. Roxane even lets him into the house now, though she always used to throw stones at him before!'

What was he going on about? She didn't want to talk about Dustfinger or Gwin. If you really missed me, she kept thinking, then why didn't you come to see me at least once instead of

going to Roxane's? Just once. There was only one answer: because he hadn't been missing her half as much as she'd missed him. He loved Dustfinger more than her. He would always love Dustfinger, even now he was dead. All the same, she let him kiss her, only a few paces from where the boy was still in the pillory with fire-elves on his skin. *Don't tell me you can get used to such sights ...*

Meggie didn't see Sootbird until he had reached the guards.

'What is it?' Farid asked, as she stared over his shoulder. 'Ah, Sootbird. Yes. He's always going in and out of the castle. Whenever I see him I feel I could slit his throat!'

'We must warn Mo!'

The guards let the fire-eater pass through like an old acquaintance. Meggie took a step towards them, but Farid kept her back.

'Where do you think you're going? Don't worry, he won't see your father! The castle is large, and Silvertongue is going to see Balbulus. Sootbird won't lose his way and end up there too, you can bet! He has three lovers among the court ladies, he's off to see them – if Jacopo doesn't nab him first. He has to perform for the boy twice a day, and he's still a terrible fire-eater in spite of all they say about him. Miserable informer! I really wonder why the Black Prince hasn't killed him yet – or your father. Why are you looking at me like that?' he added, seeing Meggie's horrified expression. 'Silvertongue killed Basta, didn't he? Not that I saw it.' Farid glanced quickly down, as he always did in speaking of the hours when he had been dead.

Meggie stared at the castle gates. She thought she could hear Mo's voice talking about Sootbird. *And if he does ... last time he saw me I was half dead. And another encounter will be the worse for him.*

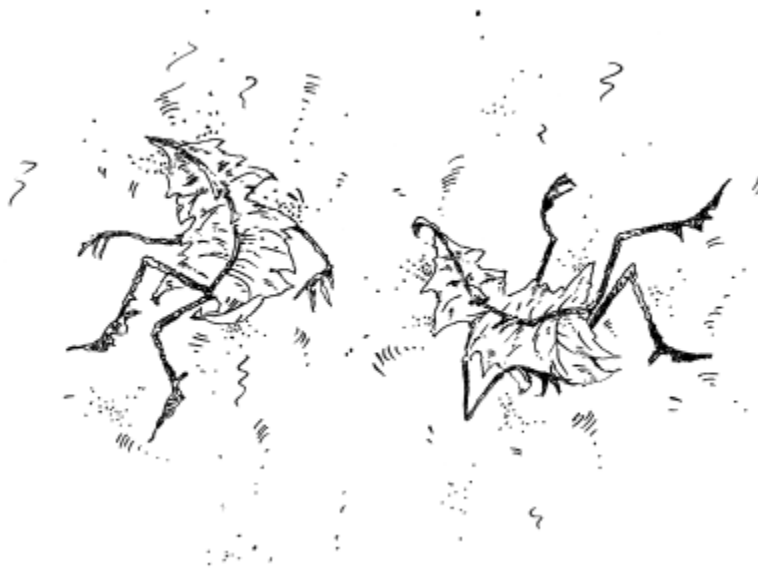
The Bluejay. Stop thinking of him by that name, Meggie thought. Stop it!

‘Come on!’ Farid took her hand. ‘Silvertongue said I was to take you to Roxane. Won’t she just be glad to see me! But I expect she’ll put on a friendly act if you’re there too.’

‘No.’ Meggie freed her hand from his, good as it felt to be holding hands with him again at last. ‘I’m staying here. I’m staying right here until Mo comes out again.’

Farid sighed and rolled his eyes, but he knew her well enough not to argue with her.

‘Oh, wonderful!’ he said, lowering his voice. ‘If I know Silvertongue he’s sure to spend forever looking at those wretched books. So at least let me kiss you, or the guards will soon be wondering why we’re still standing around.’





7

A Dangerous Visit

The question, given God's omniscient view,
Is: must what he foresees perforce come true?
Or is free choice of action granted me
To do a thing or else to let it be?

Geoffrey Chaucer,
The Canterbury Tales (modernized)

Humble. Humility and servility. He wasn't good at it. Did you ever notice that in the other world, Mortimer? he asked himself. Bow your head, don't stand too straight, let them look down on you even if you're taller than they are. Act as if you think it's perfectly natural for them to rule and everyone else to work.

It was so hard.

‘Ah, you’re the bookbinder Balbulus is expecting,’ one of the guards had said, glancing at his black clothes. ‘What was all that with the boy just now? Don’t you like our pillory?’

Head lower, Mortimer! Go on. Pretend to be afraid. Forget your anger, forget the boy and his whimpering. ‘It won’t happen again.’

‘Exactly! He ... he comes from far away,’ Fenoglio was quick to add. ‘He has yet to get used to our new governor’s rule. But if you’ll allow us ... Balbulus can be very impatient.’ Then he had bowed and hastily drew Mo on with him.

Ombra Castle ... it was difficult not to forget everything else when he stepped into the great courtyard. He remembered so many of the scenes from Fenoglio’s book set here.

‘Heavens above, that was a close thing!’ whispered Fenoglio as they led the horse to the stables. ‘I don’t want to have to remind you again: you’re here as a bookbinder! Play the Bluejay just once more and you’re a dead man! Damn it, Mortimer, I ought never to have agreed to bring you here. Look at all those soldiers. It’s like being in the Castle of Night!’

‘Oh no, I assure you there’s a difference,’ Mo replied quietly, trying not to look up at the heads impaled on pikes that adorned the walls. Two belonged to a couple of the Black Prince’s men, although he wouldn’t have recognized them if the Strong Man hadn’t told him about their fate. ‘Although I didn’t imagine the castle quite like this from your original description in *Inkheart*,’ he whispered to Fenoglio.

‘You’re telling me?’ Fenoglio murmured. ‘First Cosimo had it all rebuilt, now the Milksop’s leaving his mark on the place. He’s had the gold-mockers’ nests torn down, and look at all the shacks they’ve put up to hoard their loot! I wonder if the Adderhead’s noticed yet how little of it ever reaches the Castle of Night. If he has, his brother-in-law will soon be in trouble.’

‘Yes, the Milksop is pretty brazen about it.’ Mo lowered his head as a couple of grooms came towards them. Even they were

armed. His knife wouldn't be much use if anyone actually did recognize him. 'We stopped a few convoys intended for the Castle of Night,' he continued quietly when they had passed, 'and the contents of the chests always proved rather disappointing.'

Fenoglio stared at him. 'You're really doing it?'

'Doing what?'

The old man looked nervously around, but no one seemed to be taking any notice of them. 'Well, all the things they sing about!' he whispered. 'I mean ... most of the songs are poor stuff, badly written, but the Bluejay is still my character, so ... what does it feel like? What does it feel like, playing him?'

A maid carried two slaughtered geese past them. The birds' blood dripped on to the courtyard paving stones. Mo turned his head away. 'Playing? Is that what it still feels like to you – some kind of game?' His reply sounded touchier than he had intended.

Sometimes he'd really have given anything to read the thoughts in Fenoglio's head. And, who knew, maybe he would indeed read them some day in black and white, and find himself there on the page with words spun around him, like a fly caught in an old spider's web.

'I admit it's turned into a dangerous game, but I'm really glad you took the part! Because wasn't I right? This world *needs* the Blue—'

Mo interrupted Fenoglio – and put his fingers to his lips. A troop of soldiers passed them, and Fenoglio bit back the name he had first written down on a piece of parchment not so long ago. But the smile with which he watched the soldiers pass was the smile of a man who had planted an explosive device in his enemies' house, and was enjoying mingling with them knowing they had no idea he had laid that bomb.

Wicked old man.

Mo realized that the Inner Castle didn't look as Fenoglio had described it any more, either. He quietly repeated the words he had once read: *The Laughing Prince's wife had laid out the garden because she was tired of the grey stones all around her. She planted flowers from foreign lands, and when they came into bloom they made her dream of distant seas, strange cities and mountains where dragons lived. She allowed gold-breasted birds to breed, birds that perched in the trees like feathered fruits, and planted a seedling from the Wayless Wood, a tree with leaves that could talk to the moon.*

Fenoglio looked at him in surprise.

'Oh, I know your book by heart,' said Mo. 'Have you forgotten how often I read aloud from it after your words had swallowed up my wife?'

The gold-breasted birds had left the Inner Courtyard too. The Milksop's statue was reflected in a stone basin, and if the tree that talked to the moon ever existed then it had been felled. Dog-pens stood where there had once been a garden, and the new lord of Ombra's hounds pressed their noses to the silvered wire fencing. It's a long time since this was your story, old man, thought Mo as he and Fenoglio walked towards the Inner Castle. But, then, who was telling it now? Orpheus, maybe? Or had the Adderhead taken over as narrator, using blood and iron instead of pen and ink?

Tullio took them to Balbulus, Tullio the furry-faced servant said in Fenoglio's book to be the offspring of a brownie father and a moss-woman mother.

'How are you?' Fenoglio asked him as Tullio led them down the corridors. As if it had ever interested him how his creations were doing.

Tullio answered with a shrug of his shoulders. 'They hunt me,' he said, his voice barely audible. 'Our new master's friends – and he has a lot of them. They chase me along the passages

and shut me in with the hounds, but Violante protects me. She protects me even though her son is one of the worst of them.'

'Her son?' Mo asked.

'Yes, didn't Meggie tell you about him?' Fenoglio whispered back. 'Jacopo, a real little devil. His grandfather in miniature, although he's getting to look more like his father every day. Not that he ever shed a tear for Cosimo. Far from it. They say he daubed Cosimo's bust in the crypt with Balbulus's paints, and in the evenings he sits beside the Milksop or on Sootbird's lap instead of keeping his mother company. It's said he even spies on her for his grandfather the Adderhead.'

Mo had read nothing in Fenoglio's book about the door outside which Tullio finally stopped, rather breathless after climbing so many steep flights of stairs. He instinctively put out his hand to stroke the letters that covered it. 'They're so beautiful, Mo,' Meggie had murmured as the two of them sat high in their prison in the Castle of Night. 'Intertwined as if someone had written them on the wood in liquid silver.'

Tullio raised his small, furry fist and knocked. The voice calling them in could belong to no one but Balbulus. *Cold, self-satisfied, arrogant* ... the words Meggie had used to describe the best illuminator in this world were not nice ones. Tullio stood on tiptoe, took hold of the door handle – and then let go of it again in alarm.

'Tullio!' The voice echoing up the staircase sounded very young, but it seemed used to giving orders. 'Where are you, Tullio? You must come and hold the torches for Sootbird.'

'Jacopo!' Tullio breathed the word as if it were the name of an infectious illness. He ducked and instinctively tried to shelter behind Mo's back.

A boy of perhaps six or seven came running upstairs. Mo had never seen Cosimo the Fair. The Milksop had had all his statues smashed, but Battista still had a few coins with his picture on them. A face almost too beautiful to be real, that was how

everyone described him. His son had obviously inherited that beauty, although as yet it was only developing on his still round, childish face. But it was not an endearing face. The boy's eyes were watchful, and his mouth was as sullen as an old man's. His black tunic had an embroidered pattern showing his grandfather's emblematic adder with its flickering tongue, and even his belt was set with silver snakes, but around his neck dangled a silver nose – the Piper's trademark.

Fenoglio cast Mo a glance of alarm and stood in front of him, as if that would hide him from the boy.

You must come and hold the torches for Sootbird. Now what, Mo? He instinctively glanced down the stairs, but Jacopo had come alone, and this castle was large. His hand went to his belt all the same.

'Who's that?' Only the defiance in the clear voice sounded like a little boy's. Jacopo was breathing heavily from all that stair-climbing.

'He's ... er ... he's the new bookbinder, my Prince!' replied Fenoglio, bowing. 'I'm sure you remember how often Balbulus has complained of the clumsiness of our local bookbinders!'

'And this one's better?' Jacopo folded his little arms. 'He doesn't look like a bookbinder. Bookbinders are old, and all pale because they sit indoors the whole time.'

'Oh, we go out now and then too,' replied Mo. 'We go out to buy the best leather, new stamps, good knives, or to dry parchment in the sun if it's damp ...'

He found it difficult to feel afraid of the boy, although he had heard so much that was bad about him. Cosimo's son reminded him of a boy he had known at school who was unlucky enough to be the headmaster's son. He used to stalk around the school yard like a copy of his father – and he was afraid of everything and everyone in the world. That's all very well, Mortimer, Mo told himself, but he was only a headmaster's son. This is the grandson of the Adderhead, so take care.

Jacopo frowned and looked disapprovingly at him. Obviously he didn't like the fact that Mo was so much taller than he was. 'You didn't bow! You have to bow to me.'

Mo felt Fenoglio's warning glance and bowed his head. 'My Prince.'

It was difficult. He would rather have chased Jacopo along the castle corridors in fun, the way he used to chase Meggie in Elinor's house, just to see if the child in him would emerge, carefully hidden as it was behind his grandfather's mannerisms.

Jacopo acknowledged his bow with a magnanimous nod, and Mo bowed his head again so that the boy wouldn't see his smile.

'My grandfather is having trouble with a book,' remarked Jacopo in his arrogant voice. 'A lot of trouble. Perhaps you can help him.'

Trouble with a book. Mo felt his heart miss a beat. In his mind's eye he saw the book before him again, felt the paper between his fingers. All those blank pages.

'My grandfather has had lots of bookbinders hanged already because of that book.' Jacopo looked at Mo as if working out the size of the noose to fit his neck. 'He even had one flayed because the man had promised he could make the book better. Will you try all the same? But you'd have to ride to the Castle of Night with me so that my grandfather can see I was the one who found you, not the Milksop.'

Mo managed to get out of answering that as the door covered with letters opened and a man came out, an expression of annoyance on his face.

'What's all this?' he snapped at Tullio. 'First there's a knock but no one comes in, then so much talk that my brush slips. So, as you all clearly have not come to see me, I would be greatly obliged if you'd continue your conversation somewhere else. There are more than enough rooms in this castle where no real work is done.'

Balbulus ... Meggie had described him very well. The slight lisp, the short nose and plump cheeks, the dark brown hair already receding from his forehead, although he was still quite a young man. An illuminator – and from what Mo had seen of his work, one of the best there had ever been, in either this world or his own. Mo forgot Jacopo and Fenoglio, he forgot the pillory and the boy in it, the soldiers down in the courtyard and even Sootbird. All he wanted was to go through that door. Even the glimpse of the workshop that he caught over Balbulus's shoulder made his heart beat as fast as a schoolboy's. He felt the same excitement as when he first held a book illustrated by Balbulus in his hand, when he was a prisoner threatened with death in the Castle of Night. This man's work had made him forget all that. Letters flowing as easily as if there were no more natural occupation for the human hand than writing, and then the pictures. Living, breathing parchment!

'I'll talk to people where and when I like! I'm the Adderhead's grandson!' Jacopo's voice was shrill. 'I'm going to tell my uncle how impertinent you've been again. I'm going to tell him this minute! I'll say he ought to take all your brushes away from you!' With one last glance at Balbulus he turned. 'Come on, Tullio. Or I'll shut you in with the hounds!'

The little servant went to Jacopo's side, head hunched between his shoulders, and the Adderhead's grandson inspected Mo again from head to foot before turning and hurrying down the stairs again – suddenly just a child after all, in a hurry to see a show.

'We ought to get out, Mortimer!' Fenoglio whispered to him. 'You should never have come to this place! Sootbird is here. It's not good, not good at all.'

But Balbulus was already impatiently beckoning the new bookbinder into his workshop. What did Mo care about Sootbird? He could think of nothing but what awaited him behind the door with the silver letters all over it.

He had spent so many hours of his life poring over the art of illumination, bending close to stained pages until his back ached, following every brush stroke with a magnifying glass, and wondering how such marvels could be captured on parchment. All the tiny faces, all the fantastic creatures, landscapes, flowers, miniature dragons, insects, so real that they seemed to be crawling off the pages. Letters as artfully entwined as if their lines had begun to grow only on that parchment.

Was all that waiting for him on the desks in there?

Maybe. But Balbulus stood in front of his work as if he were its guardian, and his eyes were so expressionless that Mo wondered how a man who bent so cold a gaze on the world could paint such pictures. Pictures so full of strength and fire ...

‘Inkweaver.’ Balbulus nodded to Fenoglio with a look that seemed to sum him up: the unshaven chin, the bloodshot eyes, the weariness in the old man’s heart. And what, Mo wondered, will he see in me?

‘So you’re the bookbinder?’ Balbulus inspected him as thoroughly as if he planned to capture him on parchment. ‘Fenoglio tells me truly wonderful things about your skill.’

‘Oh, does he?’ Mo couldn’t help sounding distracted. He wanted to see those pictures at long last, but once again the illuminator barred his way as if by chance. What did this mean? Let me see your work, thought Mo. You ought to feel flattered that I’ve risked my neck to come here for its sake. Good heavens, those brushes really were incredibly fine. And then there were the paints ...

Fenoglio dug a warning elbow into his ribs, and Mo reluctantly tore himself away from the sight of all these wonders and looked into Balbulus’s expressionless eyes.

‘I’m sorry. Yes, I’m a bookbinder, and I am sure you will want to see a sample of my work. I didn’t have particularly good materials available, but ...’ He put his hand under the cloak

that Battista had made (stealing so much black fabric couldn't have been easy), but Balbulus shook his head.

'You don't have to show me any evidence of what you can do,' he said, never taking his eyes off Mo. 'Taddeo, the librarian in the Castle of Night, has told me at length how impressively you proved your abilities there.'

Lost.

He was lost.

Mo sensed Fenoglio's appalled glance on him. Yes, look at me, he thought. Are the words 'reckless idiot' written as black as ink on my forehead?

However, Balbulus smiled. His smile was as hard to fathom as his eyes.

'Yes, Taddeo has told me about you at length.' Meggie had given a good imitation of the way his tongue touched his teeth as he spoke. 'Usually he is rather a reserved man, but he positively sung your praises to me in writing. After all, there aren't many of your trade who can bind death itself in a book, are there?'

Fenoglio gripped his arm so hard that Mo could feel the old man's fear. Did he think they could simply turn and walk out of the door? A guard would surely have been posted outside some time ago, and even if not, there were soldiers waiting at the bottom of the stairs. How quickly you got used to the way they could appear at any moment, armed with the power to take a man away, imprison him or kill him with impunity ... how Balbulus's colours glowed! Vermilion, sienna, burnt umber ... how beautiful they were. Beauty that had lured him into a trap. Most birds were trapped with bread and a few tasty seeds, but the Bluejay could be caught by words and pictures.

'I really don't know what you're talking about, highly esteemed Balbulus!' stammered Fenoglio. His fingers were still clutching Mo's arm. 'The ... er ... librarian at the Castle of

Night? No. No, Mortimer's never worked on the other side of the forest. He comes from ... from the north, yes, that's it.'

What a terrible liar the old man was. You'd have thought someone who made up stories could tell better lies.

However that might be, Mo himself was no good at lying either, so he kept quiet, silently cursing his curiosity, his impatience, his recklessness, while Balbulus went on staring at him. What had made him think he could simply discard the part he was expected to play in this world by putting on a few black clothes? What had made him think he could go back to being Mortimer the bookbinder for a few hours here in Ombra Castle?

'Oh, be quiet, Inkweaver!' Balbulus snapped at Fenoglio. 'Just how much of a fool do you think I am? Of course I knew who he was the moment you mentioned him. "A true master of his art." Isn't that how you put it? Words can be very treacherous, as you really should know by now.'

Fenoglio did not reply. Mo felt for the knife that the Black Prince had given him when they set out from Mount Adder. 'From now on you must always have it with you,' the Prince had told him, 'even when you lie down to sleep.' Mo had followed his advice, but what use would a knife be to him here? He'd be dead before he reached the foot of the stairs. For all he knew, maybe Jacopo himself had immediately realized who was standing in front of him and had raised the alarm too. *Come quick, the Bluejay's flown into the cage of his own free will!*

I'm sorry, Meggie, thought Mo. Your father is an idiot. You rescued him from the Castle of Night only for him to get himself captured in another castle. Why hadn't he listened to her when she saw Sootbird in the marketplace?

Had Fenoglio ever written a song about the Bluejay's fear? The fear didn't come when he had to fight, not then. It came when he thought of fetters, chains and dungeons, and desperation behind barred doors. Like now. He tasted fear on his tongue, felt it in his guts and his knees. At least an

illuminator's workshop is the right place for a bookbinder to die, he thought. But the Bluejay was back now, cursing the bookbinder for being so reckless.

‘Do you know what particularly impressed Taddeo?’ Balbulus flicked a little powdered paint off his sleeve. Yellow as pollen, it clung to the dark blue velvet. ‘Your hands. He thought it astonishing that hands which knew so much about killing could treat the pages of a book with such care. And you do have beautiful hands. Look at mine, now!’ Balbulus spread his fingers and examined them with distaste. ‘A peasant's hands. Large and coarse. Would you like to see what they can do all the same?’

And at last he stood aside and waved them over, like a conjuror raising the curtain on his show. Fenoglio tried to hold Mo back, but if he'd fallen into the trap, then he meant at least to taste the bait that would cost him his life.

There they were. Illuminated pages even better than those he had seen in the Castle of Night. Balbulus had adorned one of them with nothing but his own initial. The B spread right across the parchment, clad in gold and dark green and sheltering a nest full of fire-elves. On the page beside it, flowers and leaves twined around a picture hardly the size of a playing card. Mo followed the tendrils with his eyes, discovered seed-heads, fire-elves, strange fruits, tiny creatures that he couldn't name. The picture so skilfully framed showed two men surrounded by fairies. They were standing outside a village, with a crowd of ragged men behind them. One of the two was black and had a bear by his side. The other wore a bird mask, and the knife in his hand was a bookbinder's knife.

‘The Black Hand and the White Hand of Justice. The Prince and the Bluejay.’ Balbulus looked at his work with barely concealed pride. ‘I'll probably have to make some changes. You're even taller than I thought, and your bearing ... but what am I talking about? I'm sure you're not anxious for this picture to resemble you too much – although of course it's meant only for Violante's eyes. Our new governor will never see it, because

luckily there's no reason for him to toil up all the stairs to my workshop. To the Milksop's way of thinking, the value of a book is defined by the amount of wine it will buy. And if Violante doesn't hide it well, he'll soon have exchanged it – like all the other books my hands have made – for wine, or for a new silver-powdered wig. He can think himself truly lucky that I'm Balbulus the illuminator and not the Bluejay, or I'd be making parchment of his perfumed skin.'

The hatred in Balbulus's voice was black as the night painted in his pictures, and for a moment Mo saw in those expressionless eyes a flash of the fire that made the illuminator such a master of his art.

Footsteps resounded on the stairs, heavy and regular, footsteps of a kind that Mo had heard only too often in the Castle of Night. Soldiers' footsteps.

'What a pity. I really would have liked a longer chat!' Balbulus heaved a regretful sigh as the door was pushed open. 'But I'm afraid there are persons of much higher rank in this castle who want to talk to you.'

Three soldiers took Mo between them. Fenoglio watched in dismay as they tied his hands.

'You can go, Inkweaver!' said Balbulus.

'But this – this is all a terrible misunderstanding!' Fenoglio was trying really hard not to let his voice betray his fear, but even Mo wasn't deceived.

'Perhaps you shouldn't have described him in such detail in your songs,' Balbulus observed wearily. 'To the best of my knowledge that's been his undoing once before. By way of contrast, look at my pictures. I always show him with his mask on!'

Mo heard Fenoglio still protesting as the soldiers pushed him down the stairs. Resa! No, this time he didn't have to fear for her. She was safe with Roxane at the moment, and the Strong Man was with her. But what about Meggie? Had Farid taken

her to Roxane's farm yet? The Black Prince would look after both of them. He'd promised that often enough. And, who knew, perhaps they'd find their way back – back to Elinor in the old house crammed with books right up to the roof, back to the world where flesh and blood wasn't made of letters.

Mo tried not to think of where he would be by then. He knew just one thing: the Bluejay and the bookbinder would die the same death.



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8

Roxane's Pain

‘Hope,’ said Sleet bitterly. ‘I’ve learned to live without it.’

Paul Stewart,
Midnight Over Sanctaphrax

Resa often rode over to see Roxane, although it was a long way and the roads around Ombra grew more perilous with every passing day. But the Strong Man was a good bodyguard, and Mo let her go because he knew how many years she had lived in this world already, surviving even without him and the Strong Man.

Resa and Roxane had made friends tending the wounded together in the mine below Mount Adder, and their long journey through the Wayless Wood with a dead man had only deepened their friendship. Roxane never asked why Resa had

wept almost as much as she did on the night when Dustfinger struck his bargain with the White Women. They had become friends not through talking, but by sharing experiences for which there were no words.

It was Resa who had gone to Roxane by night when she heard her sobbing under the trees far from the rest of the company, Resa who had embraced and comforted her, although she knew there was no comfort for the other woman's sorrow. She did not tell Roxane about the day when Mortola shot Mo, leaving her alone with the fear that she had lost him for ever. Through all those many days and nights when she sat in a dark cave cooling his hot, feverish brow, she had only imagined how it would feel never to see him again, never to touch him again, never to hear his voice again. But the fear of pain was quite different from pain itself. Mo was alive. He talked to her, slept at her side, put his arms around her. Whereas Dustfinger would never put his arms around Roxane again. Not in this life. Roxane had nothing but memories left, and perhaps memories were sometimes worse than nothing.

And she knew that Roxane was feeling that pain for the second time. The first time, so the Black Prince had told Resa, the fire didn't even leave Roxane her dead husband's body. Perhaps that was why she guarded Dustfinger's body so jealously. No one knew the place where she had taken him, to visit him when longing wouldn't let her sleep.

It was when Mo's fever kept returning at night, and he was sleeping badly, that Resa first rode to Roxane's farm. She herself had often had to gather plants when she was in Mortola's service, but only plants that killed. Roxane had taught her to find their healing sisters. She told her which leaves were good for sleeplessness, which roots relieved the pain of an old wound, and that in this world it was wise to leave a dish of milk or an egg if you picked something from a tree, to please the wood-elves living in it. Many of the plants were strange to Resa, with unfamiliar odours that made her dizzy. Others she

had often seen in Elinor's garden without guessing what power lay hidden in their inconspicuous stems and leaves. The Inkworld had taught her to see her own world more clearly and reminded her of something Mo had said long ago: 'I think we should sometimes read stories where everything's different from our world, don't you agree? There's nothing like it for teaching us to wonder why trees are green and not red, and why we have five fingers rather than six.'

Of course Roxane knew a remedy for Resa's sickness. She was just telling her what herbs would help the flow of her milk later on when Fenoglio, with Meggie and Farid, rode into the yard. Resa asked herself why the old man and her daughter wore such a guilty look on their faces. Of course she didn't guess the reason.

Roxane put her arms around Resa as Fenoglio, his voice faltering, told them what had happened. But Resa didn't know what to feel. Fear? Despair? Anger? Yes, anger. That was what she felt first of all. She was angry with Mo for being so reckless.

'How could you have let him go?' she snapped at Meggie, so sharply that the Strong Man jumped. The words were out before she could regret them. But her anger stayed with her: because Mo had gone to the castle even though he knew it was dangerous. And because he had done it behind her back. His daughter had been allowed to come with him, but to his wife he hadn't said a word.

Roxane stroked Resa's hair as she began to sob. Tears of rage, tears of fear. She was tired of feeling afraid.

Afraid of knowing Roxane's pain.



9

A Giveaway

‘You’re going to stop cruelty?’ she asked. ‘And greediness, and all those things? I don’t think you could. You’re very clever, but, oh no, you couldn’t do anything like that.’

Mervyn Peake,
Titus Groan

A dungeon awaited him, what else? And then? Mo remembered the death that the Adderhead had promised him only too clearly. *It could take days, many days and nights.* The fearlessness that had been his constant companion over the last few weeks, the cold calm that hatred and the White Women had implanted in him – they were gone as if he had never felt them. Since meeting the White Women he no longer feared death itself. It seemed to him familiar and at

times even desirable. But dying was another matter, and so was imprisonment, which he feared almost more. He remembered, only too well, the despair waiting behind barred doors and the silence where even your own breath was painfully loud, every thought a torment, and where every hour tempted you simply to beat your head against the wall until you no longer heard and felt anything.

Mo had been unable to bear closed doors and windows since the days he had spent in the tower of the Castle of Night. Meggie seemed to have shed the fear of confinement like a dragonfly shedding its skin, but Resa felt as he did, and whenever fear woke one of them, they could find sleep again only in each other's arms.

Please, not a dungeon again.

That was what made fighting so easy – you could always choose death rather than captivity.

Perhaps he could seize a sword from one of the soldiers in one of the dark corridors, far from the other guards on duty. For guards stood everywhere with the Milksop's emblem on their chests. He had to clench his fists to keep his fingers from putting that idea into practice. Not yet, Mortimer, he told himself. Another flight of steps, burning torches on both sides. Of course, they were leading him down into the depths of the castle. Dungeons always lay high above or far below. Resa had told him about the cells in the Castle of Night, so deep in the mountainside that she had often thought she wouldn't be able to breathe in them. They weren't pushing and hitting him yet as the soldiers there had done. Would they be more civil when it came to torturing and quartering him too? Down and down they went, step by step. One in front of him, two behind him, breathing on the back of his neck. *Now, Mortimer! Try it now! There are only three of them!* Their faces were so young – children's faces, beardless, frightened under their assumed ferocity. Since when had children been allowed to play

soldiers? Always, he answered himself. They make the best soldiers because they still think they're immortal.

Only three of them. But even if he killed them quickly they would shout, bringing more men down on him.

The stairs ended at a door. The soldier in front of him opened it. *Now! What are you waiting for?* Mo flexed his fingers, getting ready. His heart was beating a little faster, as if to set the pace for him.

'Bluejay.' The soldier turned to him, bowed, and left. There was a look of embarrassment on his face. In surprise, Mo scrutinized the other two. Admiration, fear, respect. The same mixture that he had met with so often, the result not of anything he had done himself, but of Fenoglio's songs. Hesitantly, he went through the open doorway – and only then did he realize where they had brought him.

The vault of the Princes of Ombra. Mo had read about that too. Fenoglio had found fine words for this place of the dead, words that sounded as if the old man dreamt of lying in such a vault himself some day. But in Fenoglio's book the most magnificent sarcophagus of all hadn't yet been there. Candles burnt at Cosimo's feet, tall, honey-coloured candles. Their perfume sweetened the air, and his stone image, lying on a bed of alabaster roses, was smiling as if in a happy dream.

Beside the sarcophagus, very erect as if to compensate for the lack of light, stood a young woman in black, her hair drawn severely back.

The soldiers bowed their heads to her and murmured her name.

Violante. The Adderhead's daughter. She was still known as Her Ugliness, although the birthmark that had earned her the name was only a faint shadow on her cheek now – it had begun to fade, people said, on the day when Cosimo came back from the dead. Only to return there soon.

Her Ugliness.

What a nickname. How did she live with it? But Violante's subjects used it with affection. Rumour had it that she secretly had leftovers from the princely kitchen taken to the starving villages by night, and fed those in need in Ombra by selling silverware and horses from the princely stables, even when the Milksop punished her for it by shutting her up in her rooms for days on end. She spoke up for those condemned to death and taken off to the gallows, and for those who vanished into dungeons – even though no one listened to her. Violante was powerless in her own castle, as the Black Prince had told Mo often enough. Even her son didn't do as she told him, but the Milksop was afraid of her all the same, for she was still his immortal brother-in-law's daughter.

Why had they brought him to her, here in the place where her dead husband lay at rest? Did she want to earn the price put on the Bluejay's head before the Milksop could claim it?

'Does he have the scar?' She didn't take her eyes off his face.

One of the soldiers took an awkward step towards Mo, but he pushed up his sleeve, just as the little girl had the night before. The scar left by the teeth of Basta's dogs long ago, in another life – Fenoglio had made a story out of it, and sometimes Mo felt as if the old man had drawn the scar on his skin with his own hands, in pale ink.

Violante came up to him. The heavy fabric of her dress trailed on the stone floor. She was really small, a good deal smaller than Meggie. When she put her hand to the embroidered pouch at her belt Mo expected to see the beryl that Meggie had told him about, but Violante took out a pair of glasses. Ground glass lenses, a silver frame – Orpheus's glasses must have been the model for this pair. It couldn't have been easy to find a master capable of grinding such lenses.

'Yes, indeed. The famous scar. A giveaway.' The glasses enlarged Violante's eyes. They were not like her father's. 'So

Balbulus was right. Do you know that my father has raised the price on your head yet again?’

Mo hid the scar under his sleeve once more. ‘Yes, I heard about that.’

‘But you came here to see Balbulus’s pictures all the same. I like that. Obviously what the songs say about you is true: you don’t know what fear is, maybe you even love danger.’

She looked him up and down as thoroughly as if she were comparing him with the man in the pictures. But when he returned her glance she blushed – whether out of embarrassment or anger because he ventured to look her in the face, Mo couldn’t have said. She turned abruptly, went over to her husband’s tomb and ran her fingers over the stone roses as delicately as if she were trying to bring them to life.

‘I would have done exactly the same in your place. I’ve always thought we were like each other. Ever since I heard the first song about you from the strolling players. This world breeds misfortune like a pond breeding midges, but it’s possible to fight back. We both know that. I was already stealing gold from the taxes in the treasury before anyone sang those songs about you. For a new infirmary, a beggars’ refuge, or somewhere for orphans to go ... I just made sure that one of the administrators was suspected of stealing the gold. They all deserve to hang anyway.’

How defiantly she tilted her chin as she turned back to him. Almost the way Meggie sometimes did. She seemed very old and very young at the same time. What was she planning? Would she hand him over to her father, to feed the poor with the price on his head, or so that she could buy enough parchment and paints for Balbulus at last? Everyone knew that she had even pawned her wedding ring to buy him brushes. Well, what could be more suitable? thought Mo. A bookbinder’s skin, sold for new books.

One of the soldiers was still standing right behind him. The other two were guarding the door, obviously the only way out of the vault. Three. There were only three of them.

‘I know all the songs about you. I had them written down.’ The eyes behind the lenses in her glasses were grey and curiously light. As if you could see that they weren’t very strong. They certainly didn’t resemble the Adderhead’s lizard-like eyes. She must have inherited them from her mother. The book in which death was held captive had been bound in the room where she and her ugly little daughter used to live after they fell into disfavour. Did Violante still remember that room? Surely she did.

‘The new songs aren’t very good,’ she went on, ‘but Balbulus makes up for that with his pictures. Now that my father’s made the Milksop lord of this castle he usually works on them at night, and I keep the books with me so that they don’t get sold like all the others. I read them when the Milksop is making merry in the great hall. I read them out loud so that the words will drown out all that noise: the drunken bawling, the silly laughter, Tullio crying when they’ve been chasing him again ... and every word fills my heart with hope, the hope that you will stand there in the hall some day, with the Black Prince at your side, and kill them all. One by one. While I stand beside you with my feet in their blood.’

Violante’s soldiers didn’t move a muscle. They seemed to be used to hearing such words in their mistress’s mouth.

She took a step towards him. ‘I’ve had people searching for you ever since I heard from my father’s men that you were in hiding on this side of the forest. I wanted to find you before they did, but you’re good at staying out of sight. No doubt the fairies and brownies hide you, as the songs say, and the moss-women heal your wounds ...’

Mo couldn’t help it. He had to smile. For a moment Violante’s face had reminded him so much of Meggie’s when she was

telling one of her favourite stories.

‘Why do you smile?’ Violante frowned, and for a moment he glimpsed the Adderhead in her light eyes. Careful, Mortimer.

‘Oh, I know. You’re thinking: she’s only a woman, hardly more than a girl, she has no power, no husband, no soldiers. You’re right, most of my soldiers lie dead in the forest because my husband was in too much of a hurry to go to war against my father. But I’m not so stupid! “Balbulus,” I said, “spread word that you’re looking for a new bookbinder. Perhaps we’ll find the Bluejay that way. If what Taddeo said is true, he’ll come just to see your pictures. And then, when he’s in my castle, my prisoner, just as he was once a prisoner in the Castle of Night, I’ll ask him to help me kill my immortal father.”’

Violante’s lips smiled in amusement as Mo looked sideways at her soldiers. ‘Don’t look so anxious! My soldiers are devoted to me. My father’s men killed their brothers and fathers in the Wayless Wood!’

‘Your father won’t be immortal for very much longer.’ The words came from Mo’s lips unthinkingly; he hadn’t meant to speak them aloud. Idiot, he told himself. Have you forgotten who this is facing you, just because something about her reminds you of your daughter?

But Violante smiled. ‘Then what my father’s librarian told me is indeed true,’ she said, as softly as if the dead could overhear her. ‘When my father began feeling unwell he thought at first that one of his maids had poisoned him.’

‘Mortola.’ Whenever Mo said her name he pictured her raising her gun.

‘You know her?’ Violante seemed as reluctant as he was to utter that name. ‘My father had her tortured to make her say what poison she’d given him, and when she didn’t confess she was thrown into a dungeon under the Castle of Night, but she disappeared one day. I hope she’s dead. They say she poisoned my mother.’ Violante stroked the black fabric of her dress as if

she had been speaking of the quality of the silk and not her mother's death. 'Whether or not that's true, my father knows by now who's to blame for the way his flesh is rotting on his bones. Soon after your flight Taddeo noticed that the book was beginning to smell strange. And the pages were swelling. The clasps concealed it for a while, which presumably was your intention, but now they can hardly hold the wooden covers together. Poor Taddeo almost died of fear when he saw the state the book was in. Apart from my father himself, he was the only one who was permitted to touch it, and who knew where it was hidden ... he even knows the three words that would have to be written in it! My father would have killed anyone else for possessing that knowledge. But he trusts the old man more than anyone else in the world, perhaps because Taddeo was his tutor for many years, and often protected him from my grandfather when he was a child. Who knows? Of course, Taddeo didn't tell my father what state the book was in. He'd have hung even his old tutor on the spot for bringing him such bad news. No, Taddeo secretly summoned every bookbinder between the Wayless Wood and the sea to the Castle of Night, and when none of them could help him, he took Balbulus's advice to bind a second book looking just like the first, which he showed my father when he asked for it. But meanwhile my father was feeling worse every day. Everyone knows about it by now. His breath stinks like stagnant pond water, and he's freezing, as if the White Women's breath is already wrapping him in their deadly cold. What a revenge, Bluejay! Endless life with endless suffering. That doesn't sound like the doing of an angel, more like the work of a very clever devil. Which of the two are you?'

Mo didn't answer. Don't trust her, a voice inside him said. But his heart, strangely enough, told him something else.

'As I said, it was a long time before my father suspected anyone but Mortola,' Violante went on. 'His suspicions even made him forget his search for you. But a day came when one

of the bookbinders Taddeo had summoned to his aid told him what was wrong with the book, presumably hoping to be rewarded with silver for the news. My father had him killed – after all, no one must know about the threat to his immortality – but word soon spread. Now there’s hardly a bookbinder left alive in Argenta. Every one of them who couldn’t cure the book went to the gallows. And Taddeo has been thrown into the dungeons under the Castle of Night. “So that your flesh will rot away slowly like mine,” my father’s supposed to have said. I don’t know if Taddeo is still alive. He’s old, and the dungeons of the Castle of Night are enough to kill much younger men.’

Mo felt sick, just as he had in the Castle of Night when he was binding the White Book to save Resa, Meggie and himself. Even then he had guessed that he was buying their lives at the cost of many others. Poor, timid Taddeo. Mo saw him in his mind’s eye, crouching in one of those windowless dungeons. And he saw the bookbinders, he saw them very clearly, desolate figures swaying back and forth high in the air ... He closed his eyes.

‘Well, imagine that. Just as it says in the songs,’ he heard Violante say. ‘*A heart more full of pity than any other beats in the Bluejay’s breast.* You’re really sorry that other people had to die for what you did. Don’t be foolish. My father loves killing. If it hadn’t been the bookbinders he’d have hung someone else! And in the end it wasn’t a bookbinder, but an alchemist, who found a way to preserve the book. It’s rumoured to be a very unappetizing way, and it couldn’t reverse the harm you’d already done, but at least the book isn’t rotting any more – and my father is looking for you harder than ever, because he still thinks only you can lift the curse you hid so skilfully between the empty pages. Don’t wait for him to find you! Steal a march on him! Ally yourself with me. You and I, Bluejay – his daughter and the robber who has already tricked him once. We can be his downfall! Help me to kill him. Together we can do it easily!’

How she was looking at him – expectant as a child who has just told her dearest wish. Come with me, Bluejay, let's kill my father! What does a man have to do to his daughter, wondered Mo, to make her want something like that?

'Not all daughters love their fathers, Bluejay,' said Violante, as if she had read his thoughts, just as Meggie so often did. 'They say your daughter loves you dearly – and you love her. But my father will kill them, your daughter, your wife, everyone you love, and last of all he'll kill you too. He won't let you go on making him a laughing stock to his subjects. He'll find you even if you go on hiding as cleverly as a fox in its earth, because with every breath he draws, his own body reminds him of what you've done to him. Sunlight hurts his skin, his limbs are so bloated that he can't ride any more. He finds even walking difficult. Day and night he pictures what he wants to do to you and yours. He's made the Piper write songs about your death, such terrible songs that anyone who hears them can't sleep, or so they say, and soon he'll send the silver-nosed man to sing them here as well – and to hunt you down. The Piper has been waiting a long time for that order, and he'll find you. His bait will be your pity for the poor. He'll kill so many of them that their blood will lure you out of the forest at last. But if I help you—'

A voice interrupted Violante, a childish voice that was clearly used to getting a hearing from adults. It echoed down the endless stairway leading to the vault.

'He's bound to be with her, you just wait and see!' How excited Jacopo sounded! 'Balbulus is a very good liar, especially when he's lying for my mother. But when he does it he plucks at his sleeves and looks even more pleased with himself than usual. My grandfather's taught me to notice that kind of thing.'

The soldiers at the door looked enquiringly at their mistress, but Violante took no notice of them. She was listening to Jacopo outside the door, when another voice was heard and Mo saw, for the first time, a trace of fear in her fearless eyes. He

knew the voice himself, and his hand went to the knife at his belt. Sootbird sounded as if the fire that he played with so clumsily had singed his vocal cords. 'His voice is like a warning,' Resa had once said of him, 'a warning to be on guard against his pretty face and the eternal smile on it.'

'What a clever lad you are, Jacopo!' Did the boy hear the sarcasm in his voice? 'But why don't we go to your mother's rooms?'

'Because she wouldn't be stupid enough to have him taken there. My mother is clever too, much cleverer than any of you!'

Violante went up to Mo and took his arm. 'Put the knife away!' she whispered. 'The Bluejay won't die in this castle. I refuse to hear that song. Come with me.'

She beckoned to the soldier standing behind Mo – a tall, broad-shouldered young man who held his sword as if he hadn't used it very often – and made her purposeful way past the stone coffins, as if this wasn't the first time she had had to hide someone from her son. More than a dozen tombs stood in the vault. Sleeping stone figures lay on top of most of them, with swords on their breasts, dogs at their feet, pillows of marble or granite under their heads. Violante hurried past them without a glance until she stopped by a coffin with a plain stone lid cracked right down the middle, as if the dead man inside had once pushed it open.

'If the Bluejay isn't here we'll go and scare Balbulus a bit, shall we?' There was jealousy in Jacopo's voice when he uttered Balbulus's name, as if he were talking about an older brother whom his mother preferred to him. 'We'll go back, and you can make fire lick around those books of his!'

The soldier's young face flushed red with effort as he heaved the lower part of the coffin lid aside. Mo kept his knife in his hand as he climbed into the sarcophagus. There was no dead body in it, but all the same Mo felt he could hardly breathe as he stretched out in the cold, cramped space. The coffin had

clearly been made for a smaller man. Had Violante thrown his bones away so that she could hide her spies inside it? The darkness was almost total when the soldier pushed the cracked lid back into place. A little light and air came in through a few holes forming a flower pattern. Breathe steadily, Mo, breathe calmly, he told himself. He still had the knife in his hand; it was a pity none of the stone swords the dead were holding would be any use. 'Do you really think it's worth risking your own skin for a few painted goatskins?' Battista had enquired when he asked him to make the clothes and the belt. What a fool you are, Mortimer. Hasn't this world done enough to show you how dangerous it is? But Balbulus's painted goatskins had been very beautiful.

A knock. A bolt was pushed back. The voices came to his ears more distinctly now. Footsteps. Mo tried to peer through the holes, but he could see only another coffin, and the black hem of Violante's dress disappearing as she walked quickly away. His eyes weren't going to help him. He let his head sink back on to the cold stone and listened. How loud his breathing was. Could there be any sound more suspicious here among the dead?

Suppose it isn't just by chance that Sootbird has turned up now, something inside him whispered. Suppose Violante was only setting a trap for you? *Not all daughters love their fathers.* Suppose Her Ugliness was planning to give her father a very special present all the same? 'Look who I've caught for you. The Bluejay. He was disguised as a crow. I wonder who he thought he'd fool that way?'

'Your Highness!' Sootbird's voice echoed through the vault as if he were standing right beside the coffin where Mo lay. 'Forgive us for disturbing you in your grief, but your son wants me to meet a visitor you received today. He insists on it. He thinks the man is an old and very dangerous acquaintance of mine.'

‘A visitor?’ Violante’s voice sounded as cool as the stone beneath Mo’s head. ‘The only visitor down here is death, and it’s not much use warning anyone against death, is it?’

Sootbird laughed uneasily. ‘No, certainly not, but Jacopo was talking about a flesh-and-blood visitor, a bookbinder, tall, dark hair ...’

‘Balbulus was interviewing a bookbinder today,’ Violante replied. ‘He’s been looking for one for a long time now. Someone who knows his trade better than the bookbinders of Ombra.’

What was that noise? Of course. Jacopo hopping about on the flagstones. Obviously he sometimes acted like any other child after all. The hopping came closer. The temptation simply to stand up instead of lying there was very strong. It was difficult to keep your body as still as a corpse while you were still breathing. Mo closed his eyes so as not to see the stone around him. Keep your breath as shallow as you can, he told himself, breathe as quietly as the fairies.

The hopping stopped right beside him.

‘You’ve hidden him!’ Jacopo’s voice reached Mo inside the sarcophagus as if he were speaking the words for Mo’s ears alone. ‘Shall we look in the coffins, Sootbird?’

The boy seemed to find the notion very enticing, but Sootbird laughed nervously. ‘Oh, I’m sure that won’t be necessary, if we tell your mother who she’s dealing with. This bookbinder could be the very man your father is looking for so desperately, Highness.’

‘The Bluejay? The Bluejay, here in the castle?’ Violante’s voice sounded so incredulous that even Mo believed she was taken by surprise. ‘Of course! I’ve told my father time and again: one day that robber’s own daring will be his downfall. You’re not to say a word of this to the Milksop. I want to catch the Bluejay myself, and then at last my father will realize who ought to be on the throne of Ombra! Have you reinforced the

guards at the gates? Have you sent soldiers to Balbulus's workshop?'

'Er ... no.' Sootbird was obviously confused. 'I mean ... he isn't with Balbulus any more, he ...'

'What? You fool!' Violante's voice was as sharp as her father's. 'Lower the portcullis over the gateway. At once! If my father hears that the Bluejay was in this castle, in my library, and simply rode away again ...' How menacing she made those words sound in the chilly air! She was indeed clever; her son was right.

'Sandro!' That must be one of her soldiers. 'Tell the guards at the main gates to let the portcullis down. No one is to leave the castle. No one, do you hear? I only hope it's not too late already! Jacopo!'

'Yes?' There was fear and defiance in the high voice – and a trace of distrust.

'If he finds the gates closed, where could the Bluejay hide? You know every hiding place in this castle, don't you?'

'Of course!' Now Jacopo sounded flattered. 'I can show you all of them.'

'Good. Take three of the guards from outside the throne-room upstairs and post them at the most likely hiding places you know. I'll go and talk to Balbulus. The Bluejay! In my castle!'

Sootbird stammered something. Violante brusquely interrupted him, ordering him to go with her. Their footsteps and voices moved away, but Mo thought he could still hear them for some time on the endless stairs leading up and away from the dead, back to the world of the living, to the daylight where you could breathe easily ...

Even when all was perfectly still again he lay there for a few more agonizing moments, listening until he felt as if he could hear the dead themselves breathing. Then he braced his hands

against the stone lid – and hastily reached for his knife when he heard footsteps again.

‘Bluejay!’

It was no more than a whisper. The cracked lid was pushed aside, and the soldier who had helped him into his hiding place reached out a hand to him.

‘We must hurry!’ he whispered. ‘The Milksop has raised the alarm. There are guards everywhere, but Violante knows ways out of this castle that even Jacopo hasn’t found yet. I hope,’ he added.

As Mo clambered out of the sarcophagus, legs stiff from lying in its cramped space, he still had the knife in his hand.

The boy stared at it. ‘How many have you killed?’ His voice sounded almost awestruck. As if killing were a high art, like the painting of Balbulus. How old would the lad be? Fourteen? Fifteen? He looked younger than Farid.

How many? What was he to say to that? Only a few months ago the answer would have been so simple. Perhaps he’d even have laughed out loud at such a ridiculous question. Now he just said, ‘Not as many as those who lie here,’ although he wasn’t sure that he was telling the truth.

The boy looked along the rows of the dead as if counting them. ‘Is it easy?’

Judging by the curiosity in his eyes, he really didn’t seem to know the answer, despite the sword at his side and his shirt of chain mail.

Yes, thought Mo. Yes, it’s easy ... if you have a second heart beating in your breast, cold and sharp-edged as the sword you carry. A certain amount of hatred and anger, a few weeks of fear and helpless rage, and you’ll have a heart like that. It beats time for you when you come to kill, a wild, fast rhythm. And only later do you feel your other heart again, soft and warm. It

shudders in time with the other one at the thought of what you did. It trembles and feels pain ... but that's only afterwards.

The boy was still looking at him.

'Killing is too easy,' said Mo. 'Dying is harder.'

Although Cosimo's stony smile claimed otherwise.

'Didn't you say we must hurry?'

The boy turned red under his shiny polished helmet. 'Yes ... yes, of course.'

A stone lion kept watch in front of a niche behind the coffins, the emblem of Ombra on its breast – presumably the only example of the old coat of arms that the Milksop hadn't had smashed. The soldier put his sword between the lion's bared teeth, and the wall of the vault opened just far enough for a grown man to squeeze through it. Hadn't Fenoglio described this entrance? Words that Mo had read long ago came back to his mind, about one of Cosimo's ancestors who had escaped his enemies several times along the passage beyond. And words will save the Bluejay again, he thought. Well, why not? He's made of them. All the same, his fingers passed over the stone as if they needed to reassure themselves that the walls of the vault weren't just made of paper.

'The passage comes out above the castle,' the boy whispered to him. 'Violante couldn't get your horse from the stables. It would have attracted too much attention, but there'll be another waiting there. The forest will be swarming with soldiers, so be careful! And I'm to give you these.'

Mo put his hand into the saddlebags that the boy handed him.

Books.

'Violante says I'm to tell you they're a present for you, made in the hope that you will accept the alliance she offers you.'

The passage was endless, almost as oppressively narrow as the sarcophagus, and Mo was glad when at last he saw the light

of day again. The way out was little more than a crack between a couple of rocks. The horse was waiting under the trees, and he saw Ombra Castle, the guards on the walls, the soldiers pouring out of the gates like a swarm of locusts. Yes, he would have to be very careful. All the same, he undid the saddlebags, hid among the rocks – and opened one of the books.



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10

As If Nothing Had Happened

How cruel the earth, the willows shimmering,
the birches bending and sighing.
How cruel, how profoundly tender.

Louise Glück,
Lament

Farid was holding Meggie's hand. He let her bury her face in his shirt while he kept whispering that everything would be all right. But the Black Prince still wasn't back, and the crow sent out by Gecko brought the same news as Doria, the Strong Man's younger brother, who had been spying for the robbers ever since Snapper had saved him and his friend from hanging. The alarm had been raised at the castle. The portcullis was lowered, and the guards at the gate were boasting that the

Bluejay's head would soon be looking down on Ombra from the castle battlements.

The Strong Man had taken Meggie and Resa to the robbers' camp, although they would both have preferred to go back to Ombra. 'That's what the Bluejay would want,' was all he had said, and the Black Prince set off with Battista to the farm they'd called home for the last few weeks – such happy weeks, so deceptively peaceful in the turmoil of Fenoglio's world. 'We'll bring you your things,' was all the Prince had said, when Resa asked him what he was going there for. 'You can't go back.' Neither Resa nor Meggie asked why. They both knew the answer – because the Milksop would have the Bluejay questioned, and no one could be sure that a time wouldn't come when Mo might reveal where he had been hiding during those recent weeks.

The robbers themselves moved camp only a few hours after hearing of Mo's arrest. 'The Milksop has some very talented torturers,' Snapper remarked, and Resa sank down under the trees away from the others and buried her face in her arms.

Fenoglio had stayed in Ombra. 'Perhaps they'll let me see Violante. And Minerva's working in the castle kitchen tonight, maybe she'll find out something there. I'll do everything I can, Meggie!' he had promised as he said goodbye.

'Like getting into bed and drinking two jugs of wine!' was all Farid said to that, but he kept remorsefully silent when Meggie began to cry.

Why had she let Mo ride to Ombra? If only she'd at least gone to the castle with him, but she'd wanted to be with Farid so much. She saw the same accusation in her mother's eyes: you could have stopped him, Meggie, no one else but you could have done it.

When darkness began to fall Woodenfoot brought them something to eat. His stiff leg had earned him his name. Although not the fastest of the robbers, he was a good cook, but

neither Meggie nor Resa could swallow a morsel. It was bitterly cold, and Farid tried to persuade Meggie to sit by the fire with him, but she just shook her head. She wanted to be alone with herself in the dark. The Strong Man brought her a blanket. His brother was with him, Doria. 'Not much good at poaching, but he's a first-class spy,' the Strong Man had whispered to her when he introduced them. The two brothers were not very much alike, although they had the same thick brown hair and Doria was already strong for his age (something that filled Farid with envy). He wasn't very tall. Doria only just came up to his elder brother's shoulder, and his eyes were as blue as the skin of Fenoglio's fairies, while the Strong Man's eyes were acorn-brown. 'We have different fathers,' the Strong Man had explained when Meggie expressed her surprise at the difference between them. 'Not that either of them's worth a lot.'

'You mustn't worry.' Doria's voice sounded very grown-up.

Meggie raised her head.

He put the blanket around her shoulders, and stepped shyly back when she looked up at him, but he did not avoid her eyes. Doria looked everyone in the face, even Snapper – and most people looked away from Snapper.

'Your father will be all right, believe me. He'll outwit them all: the Milksop, the Adderhead, the Piper ...'

'After they've hanged him?' asked Meggie. She sounded as bitter as she felt, but Doria just shrugged his shoulders.

'Nonsense. They were going to hang me too,' he said. 'He's the Bluejay! He and the Black Prince will save us all, you wait and see.' He made it sound as if it couldn't turn out any other way. As if he, Doria, were the only one who had read to the end of Fenoglio's story.

But Snapper, sitting under the trees with Gecko only a little way off, laughed hoarsely. 'Your brother's as big a fool as you!' he called over to the Strong Man. 'It's his bad luck he doesn't have your muscles, so I guess he won't live to be very old. The

Bluejay is finished! And what does he leave behind as his legacy? The immortal Adderhead!’

The Strong Man clenched his fists and was about to go for Snapper, but Doria pulled him back when Gecko drew his knife and rose to his feet. The two of them often quarrelled, but suddenly they both raised their heads and listened. A jay was calling in the oak above them.

‘He’s back! Meggie, he’s back!’ Farid climbed down from his lookout post so fast that he almost lost his balance.

The fire had burnt low; only the stars shone down into the dark ravine where the robbers had pitched their new camp, and Meggie didn’t see Mo until Woodenfoot limped over to him with a torch. Battista and the Black Prince were with him. They all seemed unharmed. Doria turned to her. *Well, Bluejay’s daughter*, his smile seemed to be saying, *what did I tell you?*

Resa jumped up in such haste that she stumbled over her blanket. She made her way through the crowd of robbers standing around Mo and the Prince. As if in a dream, Meggie followed her. It was too good *not* to be a dream.

Mo was still wearing the black clothes that Battista had made him. He looked tired, but he did indeed seem to be uninjured.

‘It’s all right. Everything’s all right,’ Meggie heard him say as he kissed the tears from her mother’s face, and when Meggie was there in front of him he smiled at her as if this were their old life, and he had only been on a short journey to cure a few sick books, not from a castle where people wanted to kill him.

‘I’ve brought you something,’ he whispered to her, and only the way he hugged her so tight and for so long told her that he had been as frightened as she was.

‘Leave him alone, will you?’ the Black Prince told his men as they crowded around Mo, wanting to know how the Bluejay had escaped from Ombra Castle as well as the Castle of Night. ‘You’ll hear the story soon enough. And now, double the guard.’

They reluctantly obeyed, sat around the dying fire grumbling, or disappeared into the tents that had been patched together out of pieces of fabric and old clothes, offering only scant shelter from nights that were growing colder all the time. But Mo beckoned Meggie and Resa over to his horse and delved into the saddlebags. He brought out two books, handling them as carefully as if they were living creatures. He gave one to Resa and one to Meggie – and laughed when Meggie snatched hers so quickly that she almost dropped it.

‘It’s a long time since the two of us had a book in our hands, right?’ he whispered to her with an almost conspiratorial smile. ‘Open it. I promise you, you never saw a more beautiful book.’

Resa had taken her book too, but she didn’t even look at it. ‘Fenoglio said that illuminator was the bait for you,’ she said in an expressionless voice. ‘He told us they arrested you in his workshop.’

‘It wasn’t exactly what it seemed. As you can see, no harm came of it. Or I wouldn’t be here, would I?’

Mo said no more, and Resa asked no further questions. She didn’t say a word when Mo sat down on the short grass in front of the horses and drew Meggie down beside him.

‘Farid?’ he said, and Farid left Battista, whom he was obviously trying to question about events in Ombra, and went over to Mo with the same awe on his face that Meggie had seen on Doria’s.

‘Can you make some light for us?’ Mo asked, and Farid knelt down between them and made fire dance on his hands, although Meggie could clearly see that he didn’t understand how the Bluejay could sit there right after his narrow escape from the Milksop’s soldiers, showing his daughter a book before he did anything else.

‘Did you ever see anything so beautiful, Meggie?’ Mo whispered as she caressed one of the gilded pictures with her finger. ‘Apart from the fairies, of course,’ he added with a smile

as one of them, pale blue like the sky Balbulus painted, settled drowsily on the pages.

Mo shooed the fairy away as Dustfinger had always done, by blowing gently between her shimmering wings, and Meggie, beside him, bent her head over the pages and forgot her fears for him. She forgot Snapper, she even forgot Farid, who didn't so much as glance at what she couldn't tear her own eyes away from: lettering in sepia brown, as airy as if Balbulus had breathed it on to the parchment, dragons, birds stretching their long necks at the heads of the pages, initials heavy with gold leaf like shining buttons among the lines. The words danced with the pictures and the pictures sang for the words, singing their colourful song.

'Is that Her Ugliness?' Meggie laid a finger on the finely drawn figure of a woman. There she stood, slender beside the written lines, her face barely half the size of Meggie's little fingernail, yet you could see the pale birthmark on her cheek.

'Yes. And Balbulus made sure she'll still be recognized many hundreds of years from now.' Mo pointed to the name that the illuminator had written in dark-blue ink, clearly visible above the tiny head: *Violante*. The V had gold edging as fine as a hair. 'I met her today. I don't think she deserves her nickname,' Mo went on. 'She's rather too pale, and I think she could bear a grudge for a long time, but she fears nothing.'

A leaf landed on the open book. Mo flicked it away, but it clung to his finger with thin, spidery arms. 'Well, how about this!' he said, holding it up to his eyes. 'Is it one of Orpheus's leaf-men? His creations obviously spread fast.'

'And they're seldom very nice,' said Farid. 'Watch out. Those creatures spit.'

'Really?' Mo laughed softly and let the leaf-man fly away just as it was pursing its lips.

Resa watched the strange creature go, and abruptly straightened up. 'It's all lies,' she said. Her voice shook on every

word. 'This beauty is only a lie. It's just meant to take our minds off the darkness, all the misfortune – and all the death.'

Mo put the book on Meggie's lap and got to his feet, but Resa stepped back.

'This isn't our story!' she said, in a voice loud enough for some of the robbers to turn and look at her. 'It's draining our hearts with all its magic. I want to go home. I want to forget all these horrors and not remember them until I'm back on Elinor's sofa!'

Gecko had turned too. He stared curiously at them while one of his crows tried to snatch a piece of meat from his hand. Snapper was listening as well.

'We can't go back, Resa,' said Mo, lowering his voice. 'Fenoglio isn't writing any more, remember? And we can't trust Orpheus.'

'Fenoglio will try to write us back if you ask. He owes it to you. Please, Mo! There can't be any happy ending here!'

Mo looked at Meggie, who was still kneeling beside Farid with Balbulus's book on her lap. What was he hoping for? Did he want her to contradict her mother?

Farid glared at Resa and let the fire between his fingers go out. 'Silvertongue?'

Mo looked at him. Yes, he had many names now. What had it been like when he was only Mo? Probably Meggie couldn't remember either.

'I must go back to Ombra. What am I to say to Orpheus?' Farid looked at him almost pleadingly. 'Will you tell him about the White Women?' There it was again, like fire burning on his face – his foolish hope.

'There's nothing to tell. I've said so before,' replied Mo, and Farid bowed his head and looked at his sooty hands as if Mo had snatched hope itself from his fingers.

He stood up. He still went barefoot, even though there was sometimes frost at night now. 'Good luck, Meggie,' he murmured, giving her a quick kiss. Then he turned without another word. Meggie was already missing him as he swung himself up on to his donkey.

Yes. Perhaps they really ought to go back ...

She jumped when Mo put his hand on her shoulder.

'Keep the book wrapped in a cloth when you're not looking at it,' he said. 'The nights are damp.' Then he made his way past her mother and went over to the robbers, who were sitting around the embers of their dying fire as silently as if they were waiting for him.

But Resa stood there, staring at the book in her hands as if it were another book, the one that had swallowed her up entirely over ten years ago. Then she looked at Meggie.

'What about you?' she asked. 'Do you want to stay here, like your father? Don't you miss your friends, and Elinor and Darius? And your warm bed without any lice in it, the café down by the lake, the peaceful roads?'

Meggie wished so much she could give the answer that Resa wanted to hear, but she couldn't.

'I don't know,' she said quietly.

And that was the truth.



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11

Sick with Longing

I lost a world the other day.
Has anybody found?
You'll know it by the row of stars
Around its forehead bound.

A rich man might not notice it;
Yet to my frugal eye
Of more esteem than ducats.
Oh, find it, sir, for me!

Emily Dickinson,
Collected Poems

Elinor had read countless stories in which the main characters fell sick at some point because they were so

unhappy. She had always thought that a very romantic idea, but she'd dismissed it as a pure invention of the world of books. All those wilting heroes and heroines who suddenly gave up the ghost just because of unrequited love, or longing for something they'd lost! Elinor had always enjoyed their sufferings – as a reader will. After all, that was what you wanted from books: great emotions you'd never felt yourself, pain you could leave behind by closing the book if it got too bad. Death and destruction felt deliciously real conjured up with the right words, and you could leave them behind between the pages as you pleased, at no cost or risk to yourself.

Elinor had wallowed in misery on the printed page, but she'd never thought that in real life, grey and uneventful as hers had been for many years, such pain could enter her own heart. You're paying the price now, Elinor, she often told herself these days. Paying the price for the happiness of those last months. Didn't books say that too: that there's always a price to pay for happiness? How could she ever have thought she would simply find it and be allowed to keep it? Stupid. Stupid Elinor.

When she didn't feel like getting up in the morning, when her heart faltered more and more frequently for no apparent reason, as if it were too tired to beat steadily, when she had no appetite even at breakfast time (although she had always preached that breakfast was the most important meal of the day), when Darius kept asking how she was with that anxious, owlsh expression on his face, she began wondering whether becoming ill with longing was more than just a literary invention after all. Didn't she feel, deep down inside, that her longing was sapping her strength and her appetite, even her pleasure in her books? Longing.

Darius suggested going away to auctions of rare books, or famous book shops that she hadn't visited for a long time. He drew up lists of volumes not yet in her library, lists that would have filled Elinor with delighted excitement only a year ago. But now her eyes passed over the titles with as little interest as

if she were reading a shopping list for cleaning products. What had become of her love for printed pages and precious bindings, words on parchment and paper? She missed the tug at her heart that she used to feel at the sight of her books, the need to stroke their spines tenderly, open them, lose herself in them. But it seemed as if all of a sudden her heart couldn't enjoy or feel anything, as if the pain had numbed it to everything but her longing for Meggie and her parents. Because by now Elinor had understood this too: a longing for books was nothing compared to what you could feel for human beings. The books told you about that feeling. The books spoke of love, and it was wonderful to listen to them, but they were no substitute for love itself. They couldn't kiss her like Meggie, they couldn't hug her like Resa, they couldn't laugh like Mortimer. Poor books, poor Elinor.

She began spending days on end in bed. She ate too little and then too much. Her stomach hurt, her head ached, her heart fluttered inside her. She was cross and absent-minded, and began crying like a crocodile over the most sentimental stories – because of course she went on reading. What else was there for her to do? She read and read and read, but she was stuffing herself with the letters on the page like an unhappy child stuffing itself with chocolates. They didn't taste bad, but she was still unhappy. And Orpheus's ugly dog lay beside her bed, slobbering on her carpet and staring at her with his sad eyes as if he were the only creature in the world who understood her sorrows.

Well, perhaps that wasn't quite fair. Presumably Darius, too, knew just how wretched she was feeling. 'Elinor, won't you go for a little walk?' he would ask when he had brought her breakfast in bed yet again, and she still hadn't appeared in the kitchen by twelve noon. 'Elinor, I found this wonderful edition of *Ivanhoe* in one of your catalogues. Why don't we go and take a look at it? The place isn't far away.' Or, as he had said only a

few days ago, 'Please, Elinor, go and see the doctor! This can't go on!'

'The doctor?' she snapped at the poor man. 'And what do you expect me to say to him? "Well, doctor, it seems to be my heart. It feels this ridiculous yearning for three people who disappeared into a book. Do you have any pills for that kind of thing?"'

Of course Darius had had no answer. Without a word, he had just put down her tea – tea with honey and lemon, her favourite – beside the bed among the mountains of books piled on her bedside table, and gone downstairs again looking so sad that Elinor had a shockingly guilty conscience. All the same, she didn't get up.

She stayed in bed for three more days, and when she dragged herself into her library on the fourth day, still in her nightdress and dressing gown, to get something else to read, she found Darius holding the sheet of paper. The one that had taken Orpheus to the place where Elinor supposed Resa, Meggie and Mortimer still were.

'What on earth are you doing?' she asked, horrified. 'No one touches that piece of paper, understand? No one!'

Darius put the sheet back in its place and wiped a speck off the glass case with his sleeve. 'I was only looking at it,' he said in his gentle voice. 'Orpheus really doesn't write badly, does he? Although it sounds very much like Fenoglio.'

'Which is why it can hardly be described as Orpheus's writing,' said Elinor scornfully. 'He's a parasite. A louse preying on other writers – except that he feeds on their words, not their blood. Even his name is stolen from another poet! Orpheus!'

'Yes, I expect you're right,' said Darius as he carefully closed the glass case again. 'But perhaps you should call him a forger instead. He copies Fenoglio's style so perfectly that at first glance you can't tell the difference. It would be interesting to see how he writes when he has to work without a model. Can

he paint pictures of his own? Pictures that don't look like someone else's?' Darius looked at the words under the glass lid as if they could answer his question.

'Why would I be interested in that? I hope he's dead and gone. Trodden underfoot.' Grim-faced, Elinor went up to the shelves and took out half a dozen books, supplies for another cheerless day in bed. 'Yes, trodden underfoot! By a giant. Or – no, wait! Even better – I hope his clever tongue is blue and sticking out of his mouth because they've hanged him!'

That brought a smile to Darius's owlsh face.

'Elinor, Elinor!' he said. 'I think you could teach the Adderhead himself the meaning of fear.'

'Of course I could!' replied Elinor. 'Compared to me, the White Women are a bunch of sisters of mercy! But I'm stuck for the rest of my life in a story where there's no part for me but the role of a batty old woman!'

Darius didn't reply to that. However, when Elinor came downstairs again that evening to find another book, he was standing in front of the glass case once more, looking at the words Orpheus had written on the sheet of paper.



12

Back in the Service of Orpheus

Come close and consider the words.
With a plain face hiding thousands of other faces
and with no interest in your response,
whether weak or strong,
each word asks:
Did you bring the key?

Carlos Drummond de Andrade,
Looking for Poetry

Of course, the city gates of Ombra were closed when Farid finally rode his stubborn donkey around the last bend in the road. A thin crescent moon shone down on the castle towers, and the guards were passing the time by throwing stones at the bones dangling from the gallows outside the city walls. The Milksop had left some skeletons hanging there,

though, to spare his sensitive nose, the gallows were no longer in use. Presumably he thought that gallows left empty were too reassuring a sight for his subjects.

‘Well, well, who comes here?’ grunted one of the guards, a tall thin fellow propping himself on his spear as if his legs alone wouldn’t carry him. ‘Take a look at this laddie!’ he added, roughly seizing Farid’s reins. ‘Riding around all on his own in the middle of the night! Aren’t you afraid the Bluejay will steal that donkey from under your skinny behind? After all, he had to leave his horse up at the castle today, so he could do with your donkey. And you he’ll feed to the Black Prince’s bear!’

‘I’ve heard the bear eats nothing but men-at-arms because they crunch so nicely in his jaws.’ As a precaution, Farid’s hand went to his knife. He felt too tired to be humble – and perhaps it made him lightly reckless to know that the Bluejay had managed to get out of the Milksop’s castle safe and sound. Yes, he too found himself calling Silvertongue by that name more and more often, although Meggie was always cross if she heard him.

‘Ho, ho, hark at the lad, will you, Rizzo?’ called the guard to the other man on duty. ‘Maybe he stole the donkey himself to sell to the sausage-maker in Butchers’ Alley before the poor beast drops dead under him!’

Rizzo came closer, smiling unpleasantly, and raised his lance until the ugly spearhead was pointing straight at Farid’s chest. ‘I know this fellow,’ he said. He had two missing front teeth, which made him hiss like a snake. ‘Saw him breathing fire once or twice in the marketplace. Aren’t you the one they say learnt his trade from the Fire-Dancer?’

‘Yes. What about it?’ Farid’s stomach muscles contracted. They always did when Dustfinger was mentioned.

‘What about it?’ Rizzo prodded him with the spearhead. ‘Get off your decrepit donkey and give us a bit of a show. Maybe we’ll let you into the city afterwards.’

They did finally open the gates – after he had turned night into day for almost an hour for their pleasure, making the fire grow flowers as he had learnt to do from Dustfinger. Farid still loved the flames, even though the crackling of their voices reminded him only too painfully of the man who had taught him all about them. But he no longer made them dance in public; he did it only for himself. The flames were all that was left to him of Dustfinger, and sometimes, when he missed him so much that his heart was numb with longing, he wrote his name in fire on a wall somewhere in Ombra and stared at the letters until they went out, leaving him alone, just as Dustfinger had left him alone.

Now that Ombra had lost its menfolk, it was usually as quiet as a city of the dead by night. Tonight, however, Farid ran into several troops of soldiers. The Bluejay had stirred them up like a wasps' nest and they were still buzzing around, as if that would bring the bold intruder back. Lowering his head, Farid dragged the donkey past them, and was glad when he finally reached Orpheus's house.

It was a magnificent building, one of the finest in Ombra, and the only one on this unrestful night with candlelight still shining through the windows. Torches burnt at the entrance – Orpheus lived in constant terror of thieves – and their flickering light brought the stone gargoyles above the gate to life. Farid always shuddered to see them stare down with their bulging eyes, their mouths wide open, their nostrils distended, looking as if they were about to snort in his face. He tried to put the torches to sleep with a whisper, as Dustfinger often did, but the fire wasn't listening to him. That happened more and more often now – as if to remind him that a pupil whose master was dead was a pupil for ever.

He was so tired. The dogs barked at him as he led the donkey across the yard to its stable. Back again. Back in the service of Orpheus. He would so much rather have rested his head in Meggie's lap, or sat by the fire with Silvertongue and the Black

Prince. But for Dustfinger's sake he always came back here. Again and again.

Farid let Jink climb out of the rucksack on to his shoulder, and looked up at the stars as if he could find Dustfinger's scarred face there. Why didn't he appear to him in a dream and tell him how to bring him back? Didn't the dead sometimes do that for those they loved? Or did Dustfinger come only to Roxane, as he had promised, and to his daughter? No, if Brianna was visited by any dead man it was Cosimo. The other maids said she whispered his name in her sleep and sometimes put out her hand to him, as if he were lying beside her.

Perhaps he doesn't appear to me in my dreams because he knows I'm afraid of ghosts, thought Farid as he climbed the steps to the back door. The main entrance of the house, which led straight out into the square, was of course reserved for Orpheus himself and his fine customers. Servants, strolling players and delivery men had to plough through the muck in the yard and ring the bell at the modest little door hidden at the back of the house.

Farid rang three times, but nothing stirred. By all the demons of the desert, where was that Chunk? He had nothing to do but open a door now and then. Or was he snoring away like a dog outside Orpheus's bedroom door again?

However, when the bolt was finally pushed aside it wasn't Oss who let him in but Brianna. Dustfinger's daughter had been working for Orpheus for two weeks now, but presumably Cheeseface had no idea whose daughter was doing his laundry and scrubbing his pots. Orpheus was so blind.

Without a word, Brianna held the door open, and Farid was equally silent as he passed her. There were no words between them except those that went unspoken: *My father died for you. He left us alone for you, only for you.* Brianna blamed him for every tear her mother shed. She had told him so in a low voice after their first day together in the service of Orpheus. 'For

every single tear!’ Yet again, he thought he felt her glance on the back of his neck like a curse when he turned his back to her.

‘Where’ve you been all this time?’ Oss seized him as he was stealing away to the place in the cellar where he slept. Jink hissed and ran off. Last time Oss kicked the marten he had almost broken Jink’s ribs. ‘He’s been asking for you a hundred times over! Made me search every damn alleyway. I haven’t had a wink of sleep all night because of you!’

‘So? You sleep enough as it is!’

The Chunk hit him in the face. ‘Less of your cheek! Go on, your master’s waiting for you.’

One of the maids came towards them on the stairs. She blushed as she made her way past Farid. What was her name? Dana? A nice girl, she’d often slipped him a delicious piece of meat when Oss had stolen his food, and Farid had kissed her in the kitchen a few times for that. But she wasn’t half as beautiful as Meggie. Or Brianna.

‘I just hope he’ll let me give you a good hiding!’ Oss whispered before knocking on the door of Orpheus’s study.

That was what Orpheus called the room, although he spent far less time studying in it than groping under one of the maids’ skirts, or stuffing himself with the lavish dishes his cook had to prepare for him at any time of day or night. Tonight, however, he really was sitting at his desk, head bent over a sheet of paper, while his two glass men were arguing under their breath over whether it was better to stir ink to the left or the right. They were brothers called Jasper and Ironstone, and as different as day and night. Ironstone, the elder, loved lecturing his younger brother and ordering him about. Farid often wanted to wring his glass neck. He himself had two older brothers; they’d been one of the reasons why he had run away from home and joined a band of robbers.

‘Shut up!’ Orpheus snapped at the quarrelling glass men. ‘What ridiculous creatures you are! Stir to the left, stir to the right – just make sure you don’t spatter my whole desk with ink again while you’re stirring.’

Ironstone looked accusingly at Jasper – of course! If anyone had spattered Orpheus’s desk with ink, it had to be his little brother. But he preserved a grim silence as Orpheus put pen to paper again.

‘Farid, you really must learn to read!’ How often Meggie had told him that. And, with some difficulty, she had taught him a few letters of the alphabet. B for bear, R for robber (‘look, Farid, there’s a letter R in your name too’), M for Meggie, F for fire (wasn’t it wonderful that his name began with the same letter?), and D ... D for Dustfinger. He always got the rest mixed up. How were you supposed to remember those funny little things with their scrawled lines stretching all whichways? AOUIMTNP ... it gave him a headache just to look at them. But yes, he must learn to read, he must. How else was he ever to find out whether Orpheus was really trying to write Dustfinger back?

‘Snippets, nothing but snippets!’ Orpheus pushed Jasper aside with a curse as the glass man came up to sprinkle sand over the fresh ink. Grimly, he tore the sheet of paper he had been writing on into tiny scraps. Farid was used to that sight. Orpheus was seldom satisfied with what he put down on paper. He crumpled up what he had written, tore it in pieces, threw it on the fire with a curse, bullied the glass men and drank too much. But when he succeeded he was even more unbearable. He puffed himself up like a bullfrog, stalked proudly through Ombra like a newly-crowned king, kissed the maids with his moist, complacent lips, and let everyone know he had no equal. ‘Let them call the old man Inkweaver!’ he shouted, loudly enough to be heard all over the house. ‘It suits him. He’s nothing but a craftsman, while I ... I am an enchanter! Ink-

Enchanter, that's what they ought to call me. That's what they *will* call me someday!

But tonight, yet again, the enchantment didn't seem to be working. 'Toad-twaddle! Goose-cackle! Leaden words!' he said angrily without raising his head. 'Just a mush of words, that's what you're smearing the paper with today, Orpheus: a watery, unseasoned, tasteless, slimy mush of words!'

The two glass men hastily scrambled down the legs of the desk and began picking up the shreds of paper.

'My lord, the boy is back.' No one could sound more servile than Oss. His voice bowed to Orpheus as readily as his massive body, but his fingers held the nape of Farid's neck in a steely grip.

Orpheus turned, his face like thunder, and stared at Farid as if he had finally pin-pointed the reason for his failure. 'Where the devil have you been? With Fenoglio all this time? Or helping your girlfriend's father to steal into the castle and out again? Oh yes, I've heard about his latest exploit. Presumably they'll be singing the first bad songs about it tomorrow. That fool of a bookbinder really does play the ridiculous part the old man wrote him with touching enthusiasm.' Envy and contempt mingled in Orpheus's voice, as they so often did when he spoke of Silvertongue.

'He's not playing a part. He *is* the Bluejay.' Farid trod on Oss's foot hard enough to make him let go of his neck, and when the man tried to grab it again he pushed him away. With a grunt, the Chunk raised his big fist, but a glance from Orpheus halted him.

'Oh, really? Have you joined the ranks of his admirers too?' He put a clean sheet of paper on his desk and stared at it, as though that could fill it with the right words. 'Jasper, what are you doing down there?' he snapped at the glass man. 'How often do I have to tell you two that the maids can sweep up scraps of paper? Sharpen me another pen!'

Farid picked Jasper up, put him on the desk and earned a grateful smile. The younger glass man had to do all the unpleasant jobs – that was how his brother had fixed it – and sharpening pens was the most unpleasant of all, because the tiny blade they used slipped very easily. Only a few days ago it had cut deeply into Jasper's matchstick-thin arm, and Farid had discovered that glass men bleed like humans. Jasper's blood was transparent, of course. It had dripped on to Orpheus's paper like liquid glass, and Ironstone had slapped his little brother's face and called him a clumsy fool. For that, Farid had mixed some beer with the sand Ironstone ate. Since then Ironstone's limbs, usually clear as water (and he had been very proud of that), had been as yellow as horse's piss.

Orpheus went to the window. 'If you stay out and about so long again,' he said to Farid over his shoulder, 'I'll tell Oss to beat you like a dog.'

The Chunk smiled, and Farid cursed silently as he contemplated them both. But Orpheus was still looking up at the black night sky with a morose expression. 'Would you believe it?' he said. 'That old fool Fenoglio didn't even go to the trouble of naming the stars in this world. No wonder I keep running out of words! What's the moon called here? You'd think his senile old brain might at least have bothered about that, but no! He just called it "the moon", as if it were the same moon we saw from our windows in the other world.'

'Perhaps it really is the same moon. It was in my story too,' said Farid.

'Rubbish, of course it was different!' Orpheus turned to the window again, as if he had to explain to the entire world out there how badly made it was. "'Fenoglio," I ask him,' he went on in the self-satisfied voice that Ironstone always listened to devoutly, as if it were announcing truths never heard before, "'is Death a woman or a man in this world? Or is it perhaps just a door through which you pass into quite a different story, one that you yourself unfortunately omitted to write?" "How do I

know?” he says. How does he know? Who else knows if he doesn’t? He doesn’t tell us in his book, anyway.’

In his book ... Ironstone, who had climbed up to join Orpheus on the windowsill, cast a reverent glance at the desk where the last copy of *Inkheart* lay beside the sheet of paper on which Orpheus was writing. Farid wasn’t sure whether the glass man really understood that his entire world, himself included, had presumably slipped out of that same book. It usually lay there open, for when Orpheus was writing he kept leafing through it with restless fingers in search of the right words. He never used a single word that couldn’t be found in *Inkheart*, for he was firmly convinced that only words from Fenoglio’s story could learn to breathe in this world. Others were just ink on paper.

“Fenoglio,” I ask, “are the White Women only servants?” Orpheus went on, as Ironstone hung on every word from his soft – over-soft – lips. “Do the dead stay with them, or do the White Women take them somewhere else?” “I expect so,” the old fool replies. “I once told Minerva’s children about a castle made of bones to comfort them for Cloud-Dancer’s death, but I was only talking off the cuff.” Off the cuff! Huh!’

‘The old fool!’ repeated Ironstone like an echo, but in his reedy, glass man’s voice it was not a very impressive sound.

Orpheus turned and went back to his desk. ‘With all your roaming around, I hope at least you didn’t forget to tell Mortimer I want to talk to him? Or was he too busy playing the hero?’

‘He says there’s nothing to talk about. He says he doesn’t know anything about the White Women except what everyone knows.’

‘Oh, wonderful!’ Orpheus reached for one of the pens that Jasper had sharpened so laboriously and snapped it in two. ‘Did you at least ask whether he still sees them sometimes?’

‘I’m sure he does.’ Jasper’s voice was as delicate as his limbs. ‘Once the White Women have touched someone they never let

him go. Or so the moss-women say.'

'I know that!' said Orpheus impatiently. 'I tried questioning a moss-woman about that rumour, but the nasty creature wouldn't talk about it. She just stared at me with her mousy eyes and said I eat too much rich food and drink too much wine!'

'They talk to the fairies,' Jasper said. 'And fairies talk to glass men. Although not all of them,' he added with a sidelong glance at his brother. 'I've heard that the moss-women tell another tale of the White Women too. They say they can be summoned by anyone whose heart they've already touched with their cold fingers.'

'Oh, indeed?' Orpheus looked thoughtfully at the glass man. 'I hadn't heard that one before.'

'And it's not true! I've tried summoning them!' said Farid. 'Again and again!'

'You! How often do I have to explain that you died much too quickly?' Orpheus snapped contemptuously at him. 'You were in a great hurry to die, and just as great a hurry to come back. What's more, you're such a poor catch that I'd assume they don't even remember you! No, you're not the person to do it.' He went to the window again. 'Go and make me some tea!' he told Farid without turning. 'I have to think.'

'What kind of tea?'

Farid put Jasper on his shoulder. He took the little man with him whenever he could, to keep him safe from his big brother. Sometimes, when Orpheus didn't need either of them because he was taking his pleasure with one of the maids, or seeing his tailor for yet another fitting of some new clothes – which could last hours – Farid took Jasper with him to Seamstresses' Alley, where the glass women helped to thread the dressmakers' needles, tread seams smooth with their tiny feet, and tack lace to costly silk. For Farid had now also learnt that glass men don't just bleed, they fall in love too, and Jasper was head over heels

in love with a girl who had pale yellow limbs. He was only too fond of watching her in secret through her mistress's workshop window.

‘What kind of tea? How should I know? Something good for stomach-ache,’ replied Orpheus crossly. ‘I’ve had a pain in my belly all day as if there were stag beetles in it. How am I supposed to get anything sensible down on paper in that state?’

Of course. Orpheus always complained of stomach-ache or a headache when his writing wasn't going well. I hope his belly torments him all night, thought Farid as he closed the study door behind him. I hope it plagues him until he writes something for Dustfinger at last.





13

A Knife through the Heart

So far as he was concerned, as yet, there might never have been such a thing as a single particle of sorrow on the gay, sweet surface of the dew-glittering world.

T.H. White,
The Once and Future King

‘At least he didn’t tell you to go for the physician!’ Jasper was doing his best to cheer Farid up as he carried him down the steep stairs to the kitchen. Yes indeed, the physician who lived beyond the city gate. Orpheus had sent Farid there only a few days ago. If you went to fetch him at night he threw logs of wood at you, or came to the door brandishing one of the pairs of pincers he used to draw teeth.

‘Stomach-ache! Headache!’ said Farid crossly. ‘Cheeseface has been over-eating again, that’s all!’

‘Three roast gold-mockers filled with chocolate, fairy-nuts roasted in honey, and half a sucking pig stuffed with chestnuts,’ said Jasper, counting it up. Then he ducked in alarm as he saw Jink by the kitchen door. The marten made Jasper nervous, even though Farid kept assuring him that while martens did like to chase glass men, they never, ever ate them.

There was only one maid still in the kitchen. Farid stopped in the doorway when he saw it was Brianna. That was all he needed. She was scrubbing the pots and pans from supper, her beautiful face grey with exhaustion. The working day began for Orpheus’s maids before sunrise and often didn’t end until the moon was high in the sky. Orpheus himself made a tour of inspection of the whole house every morning, looking for cobwebs and dust, a speck on one of the mirrors that hung everywhere, a tarnished silver spoon, or a shirt that still showed a dirty mark after laundering. If he found anything he would deduct a sum from all the maids’ paltry wages on the spot. And he almost always did find something.

‘What do you want?’ Brianna turned, wiping her wet hands on her apron.

‘Orpheus has stomach-ache,’ muttered Farid, without looking at her. ‘I’m to make him some tea.’

Brianna went to one of the kitchen dressers and took an earthenware jar off the top shelf. Farid didn’t know which way to look as she poured hot water on the herbs. Her hair was the same colour as her father’s, but wavy, and it shone in the candlelight like the red gold rings that the governor liked to wear on his thin fingers. The strolling players sang songs about Dustfinger’s daughter and her broken heart.

‘Why are you staring like that?’ She took a sudden step towards him. Her voice was so cutting that Farid instinctively flinched back. ‘Yes, I look like him, don’t I?’

It was as if, all through the silence of the last few weeks, she had been sharpening her words until they were knives that she

could thrust through his heart.

‘You don’t look in the least like him. I keep telling my mother so. You’re only some good-for-nothing layabout who made out that he was my father’s son, keeping the pretence up so long that in the end my father thought he had to die for you!’

Every word a knife, and Farid felt them piercing his heart.

Brianna’s eyes were not like her father’s. She had her mother’s eyes, and they looked at Farid with the same hostility as Roxane’s. He wanted to hit her to silence her beautiful mouth. But she resembled Dustfinger too much.

‘You’re a demon, an evil spirit bringing nothing but bad luck.’ She handed him the ready-brewed tea. ‘There, take Orpheus that. And tell him his stomach would feel better if he didn’t eat so much.’

Farid’s hands trembled as he took the mug.

‘You don’t know anything about it!’ he said hoarsely. ‘Nothing at all. I didn’t want him to bring me back. Being dead felt much better.’

But Brianna only looked at him with her mother’s eyes. And her father’s face.

And Farid stumbled back up to Orpheus’s room with the hot tea, while Jasper stroked his hair with his tiny glass hand, full of pity.





14

News from Ombra

And leafing through old books we sometimes find
A dark, oracular phrase is underlined.
You once were here, but in time out of mind.

Rainer Maria Rilke,
Improvisations from Capri in Winter III

Meggie liked it in the robbers' camp. Sometimes it almost seemed to Resa as if her daughter had always dreamt of living in shabby tents. She watched Battista making himself a new mask, asked the Strong Man to teach her how to speak to the larks, and accepted the wild flowers that his younger brother brought her with a smile. It was good to see Meggie smiling again more often, although Farid was still with Orpheus. But Resa missed the farm they had left behind. She missed the silence and seclusion, and the sense of being alone

with Mo and Meggie after all the weeks when they had been apart. Weeks, months, years ...

Sometimes, when she saw the two of them sitting by the fire with the robbers, she felt almost as if she were watching them at a game they had played all through the years when she hadn't been with them. *Come on, Mo, let's play robbers.*

The Black Prince had advised Mo not to go outside the camp for the time being, and for a few days he took that advice. But on the third night he disappeared into the forest once more, all alone, as if to go in search of himself. And on the fourth night he went out with the robbers again.

Battista had sung Resa the songs that were going around Ombra after Mo's venture into the city. The Bluejay had flown away, said the songs, escaping on the back of the Milksop's best horse. It was said that he had killed ten guards, imprisoned Sootbird in the vault and stolen Balbulus's finest books. 'How much of it is true?' she had asked Mo. He laughed. 'I'm afraid I can't be said to have flown!' he had whispered, caressing her belly in which their child was slowly growing. And then he had gone out with the Black Prince again. And she lay there night after night, listening to the songs Battista sang outside the tent, terrified for her husband.

The Black Prince had had two tents pitched for them right beside his own. They were patched together from old clothes that the robbers had dyed with oak bark so that they wouldn't show up too much among the surrounding trees: one tent for Meggie, one for the Bluejay and his wife. The mats of dried moss on which they slept were damp, and when Mo went out at night Resa shared the tent with her daughter for warmth. One day the grass was so white with hoarfrost in the morning that you could see the glass men's tracks in it. 'This will be a hard winter,' said the Strong Man, not for the first time.

One could still find giants' footsteps in the ravine where the camp lay. The rain of the last few weeks had turned them into

ponds where gold-spotted frogs swam. The trees on the slopes of the ravine rose to the sky, almost as tall as the trees in the Wayless Wood. Their withering leaves covered the ground, which was cool now in autumn, with gold and flaming red, and fairies' nests hung among the branches like overripe fruit. If you looked south you could see a village in the distance, its walls showing pale as mushrooms between the trees, but it was such a poor village that even the Milksop's greedy tax-gatherers didn't bother to come this way. Wolves howled by night in the surrounding woods, pale grey owls like little ghosts flew over the shabby tents, and horned squirrels stole what food there was to steal among the camp fires.

There were a good fifty men living in the camp, sometimes more. The youngest were the two boys saved from hanging by Snapper, and now they both went spying for the Prince: Doria, the Strong Man's brother, who brought Meggie wild flowers, and his orphaned friend Luc. Luc helped Gecko to tame his crows. Six women cooked and mended for the robbers, but none of them went out at night with the men. Resa drew portraits of almost all of them, boys, men and women. Battista had found paper and chalk for her; where, he didn't say. She wondered, as she portrayed every face, if the lines on them had indeed been drawn by Fenoglio's words alone, or whether they weren't perhaps, after all, living their own lives in this world independently of the old man.

The women did not even join the men when they sat together talking. Resa always sensed the disapproving looks when she and Meggie sat down quite naturally with Mo and the Black Prince. Sometimes she returned those glances, staring Snapper in the face, and Gecko, and all the others who tolerated women in the camp only to cook food and mend clothes. She cursed the nausea that kept coming back and prevented her from at least going with Mo when he and the Prince walked in the surrounding hills, looking for a place offering better shelter for the winter.

They had been in the camp that Meggie called the Camp of Lost Giants for five days and five nights when Doria and Luc returned from Ombra about midday with news. It was obviously such bad news that Doria didn't even tell it to his brother, but went straight to the Black Prince's tent. A little later the Prince sent for Mo, and Battista assembled the men.

Doria glanced at his strong brother before stepping into the circle of robbers, as if drawing courage from him to tell his news. But his voice was clear and firm when he began to speak. He sounded so much older than he was.

'The Piper came out of the Wayless Wood yesterday,' he began. 'He took the road that approaches Ombra from the west, burning and looting as he went, letting it be known everywhere that the Milksop hasn't sent enough taxes to the Castle of Night, and he's here to collect more.'

'How many men-at-arms are there with him?' As usual, Snapper sounded brusque. Resa didn't like his voice. She didn't like anything about him.

Doria seemed to like the man who had saved his life no better than she did, judging by the look he gave him. 'A great many. More than us. Far more,' he added. 'I don't know the exact figure. The peasants whose houses they burnt didn't have time to count them.'

'Even if they *had* had time it wouldn't have been much use, would it?' replied Snapper. 'Everyone knows peasants can't count.'

Gecko laughed, and with him some of the robbers who were always to be found near Snapper: Swindler, Grabber, the Charcoal-Burner, Elfbane, and several more.

Doria's lips tightened. He and the Strong Man were peasant-born, and Snapper knew it. His own father, apparently, had been a mercenary soldier.

'Tell them what else you heard, Doria.' The Black Prince's voice sounded weary as Resa had seldom heard it before.

The boy glanced at his brother once more. 'They're taking a head-count of the children,' he said. 'The Piper is drawing up lists of all of them over six years old and no more than five feet tall.'

A murmur rose among the robbers, and Resa saw Mo leaning over to the Prince to whisper something to him. How close to each other they seemed, and how naturally Mo sat there with the ragged robbers. As if he belonged to them as much as to her and Meggie.

The Black Prince straightened up. His hair wasn't long now, as it had been when Resa had first met him. Three days after Dustfinger's death he had shaved his head, the custom in this world after the death of a friend. For on the third day, it was said, the souls of the dead entered the realm from which there was no return.

'We knew the Piper would be coming sometime,' said the Black Prince. 'The Adder could hardly have failed to notice that his brother-in-law was keeping most of the taxes he collects for himself. But as you've heard, the taxes aren't the only reason why he's coming. We all know only too well what they use children for in Argenta.'

'What *do* they use them for?' Meggie's voice sounded so clear among the voices of all the men. You couldn't tell from the sound of it that it had already changed this world several times by reading a few sentences.

'What for? The tunnels in the silver mines are narrow, Bluejay's daughter,' replied Snapper. 'Be glad you're too large to be any use down there yourself.'

The mines. Resa's hand went instinctively to the place where her unborn child was growing, and Mo glanced at her as if the same thought had struck him too.

'Of course. The Adderhead has sent far too many children to the mines already. His peasants are beginning to resist. It seems the Piper has only just put down a revolt.' Battista's voice

sounded as weary as the Prince's. There were too few of them to right all these wrongs. 'The children die quickly down there,' Battista went on. 'It's a marvel the Adder hasn't thought of taking ours before. Children with no fathers, only defenceless unarmed mothers.'

'Then we'll have to hide them!' Doria sounded as fearless as only a boy of fifteen can. 'The way you hid the harvest!'

Resa saw a smile appear on Meggie's lips.

'Hide them, oh yes, of course!' Snapper laughed with derision. 'A fabulous idea. Gecko, tell this greenhorn how many children there are in Ombra alone. He's a peasant's son, you know, can't count.'

The Strong Man was rising to his feet, but Doria cast him a warning glance, and his brother sat down again. 'I can pick my little brother up with one hand,' the Strong Man often said, 'but he's a hundred times cleverer than me.'

Gecko obviously had not the faintest notion how many children there were in Ombra, quite apart from the fact that he wasn't too good at counting himself. 'Well, there are a lot,' he faltered, while the crow on his shoulder pecked at his hair, presumably hoping to find a few lice. 'Flies and children — that's the only two things still in plentiful supply in Ombra.'

No one laughed.

The Black Prince remained silent, and so did everyone else. If the Piper wanted those children, then he would take them.

A fire-elf settled on Resa's arm. She shook it off, and found herself longing for Elinor's house so much that her heart hurt as if the elf had burnt it. She longed for the kitchen, always full of the humming of the outsize fridge, for Mo's workshop in the garden, and the armchair in the library where you could sit and visit strange worlds without getting lost in them.

'Perhaps it's just bait!' said Battista, breaking the silence. 'You know how the Piper likes to leave bait lying around — and he

knows very well that we can't simply let him take the children. Perhaps,' he added, glancing at Mo, 'perhaps he's hoping to catch the Bluejay that way at last!'

Resa saw Meggie instinctively moving closer to Mo. But his face remained unmoved, as if the Bluejay were someone else entirely.

'Violante's already told me the Piper would soon be coming here,' said Mo. 'But she said nothing about children.'

The Bluejay's voice ... the voice that had fooled the Adderhead and beguiled the fairies. It did nothing of the kind to Snapper. It merely reminded him that he had once sat where the Bluejay was sitting now – at the Black Prince's side.

'You've been talking to Her Ugliness? Fancy that! So that's what took you to Ombra Castle. The Bluejay in conversation with the Adder's daughter.' Snapper twisted his coarse face into a grimace. 'Of course she didn't tell you anything about the children! Why would she? Quite apart from the fact that we can assume she doesn't even know about it! Her Ugliness has no more say than a kitchen maid about what goes on at the castle. That's how it always was, and that's how it always will be.'

'I've told you often enough, Snapper.' The Black Prince spoke more sharply than usual. 'Violante has more power than you think. And more men, too – even if they're all very young.' He nodded to Mo. 'Tell them what happened at the castle. It's time they knew.'

Resa looked at Mo. What did the Black Prince know that she didn't?

'Yes, come on, Bluejay, tell us how you got away unscathed this time!' Snapper's voice was so openly hostile now that some of the robbers exchanged uneasy glances. 'It really does sound like enchantment! First they let you out of the Castle of Night scot-free, now you're out of Ombra Castle as well. Don't say you made the Milksop immortal too in order to get away!'

Some of the robbers laughed, but their laughter sounded uncomfortable. Resa was sure that many of them really did take Mo for some kind of enchanter, one of those men whose names were best spoken only in whispers, because they were said to know dark arts and could bewitch ordinary mortals with no more than a glance. How else was it possible for a man who had arrived as if from nowhere to be able to handle a sword better than most of them? And he could read and write as well.

‘Folk say the Adderhead’s immortality doesn’t bring him much joy!’ objected the Strong Man.

Doria sat down beside him, his eyes fixed darkly on Snapper. No, the boy certainly didn’t like his rescuer much. His friend Luc, on the other hand, followed Snapper and Gecko like a dog.

‘So how does that help us? The Piper is looting and murdering worse than ever.’ Snapper spat. ‘The Adder is immortal. The Milksop, his brother-in-law, hangs at least one of us almost every day. And the Bluejay rides to Ombra and comes back unharmed.’

All was very, very quiet once more. Many of the robbers felt that the deal the Bluejay had done with the Adderhead in the Castle of Night was more than uncanny, even if ultimately Mo had tricked the Silver Prince. But the Adderhead was immortal all the same. Again and again he enjoyed giving a sword to some man the Piper had captured and making him thrust it through his body – only to follow that up by wounding the attacker with the same sword and giving him enough time to die to attract the White Women. That was the Adderhead’s way of proclaiming that he no longer feared the daughters of Death, although it was also said that he still avoided getting too close to them. ‘Death Serves the Adder’ was the inscription he had had placed in silver lettering above the gates of the Castle of Night.

‘No. I was not required to make the Milksop immortal.’ Mo’s voice sounded cold as he replied to Snapper, very cold. ‘It was

Violante who got me safely out of the castle. After asking me to help her kill her father.'

Resa placed her hand on her belly as if to keep the words away from her unborn child. But in her mind there was room for only one thought: he's told the Black Prince what happened in the castle, but he didn't tell me. *He didn't tell me ...*

She remembered how hurt Meggie had sounded when Mo finally told them what he had done to the White Book before giving it to the Adderhead. 'You moistened every tenth page? But you can't have done! I was with you the whole time! Why didn't you say anything?' Although Mo had kept her mother's whereabouts a secret from her all those years, Meggie still believed that in the last resort he couldn't really have any secrets from her. Resa had never felt that. All the same, it hurt that he had told the Black Prince more than he told her. It hurt badly.

'Her Ugliness wants to kill her father?' Battista sounded incredulous.

'What's so surprising about that?' Snapper raised his voice as if to speak for them all. 'She's the Adder's spawn. What reply did you give her, Bluejay? Did you say you must wait until your damn book doesn't protect him from death any more?'

He hates Mo, thought Resa. He really hates him! But the look that Mo turned on Snapper was just as hostile, and Resa wondered, not for the first time, whether she simply used to overlook the anger in him, or whether it was as new as the scar on his chest.

'The Book will protect Violante's father for a long time yet.' Mo sounded bitter. 'The Adderhead has found a way to save it.'

Yet again there was murmuring among the robbers. Only the Black Prince didn't seem surprised. So Mo had told him that too. Had told him, and not her. He's turning into a different man, thought Resa. The words are changing him. This life is changing him. Even if it's only a game. If it's a game at all ...

‘But that’s impossible. If you left the pages damp it will go mouldy, and you’ve always said yourself that mould kills books as certainly as fire.’

Meggie sounded so reproachful. Secrets ... nothing eats away at love faster.

Mo looked at his daughter. That was in another world, Meggie, said his eyes. But his mouth said something else. ‘Well, the Adderhead has taught me better. The Book will go on protecting him from death – only if its pages stay blank.’

No, thought Resa. She knew what was coming next, and she felt like putting her hands over her ears, although she loved nothing in the world more than Mo’s voice. She had almost forgotten his face in all those years in Mortola’s service, but she had always remembered his voice. Now, however, it no longer sounded like her husband’s. It was the voice of the Bluejay.

‘It doesn’t take long to write three words.’ Mo did not speak loudly, but the whole Inkworld seemed full of his voice. It seemed to have belonged here for ever – among the tall, towering trees, the ragged men, the drowsy fairies in their nests. ‘The Adderhead still believes that only I can save the Book. He’ll give it to me if I go to him promising to cure it, and then ... some ink, a pen, it doesn’t take more than a few seconds to write three words. Suppose Violante can gain those few seconds for me?’

His voice painted the scene in the air, and the robbers listened as if they could see the whole thing before their eyes. Until Snapper broke the spell.

‘You’re out of your mind! Totally out of your mind!’ he said hoarsely. ‘I suppose by now you believe everything the songs say about you – how you’re invulnerable! The invincible Bluejay! Her Ugliness will sell you, and her father will skin you alive if he gets his hands on you again. That won’t take him much more than a few seconds! But your liking for playing the hero will cost all the rest of us our lives too!’

Resa saw Mo's fingers close around the hilt of his sword, but the Black Prince laid a hand on his arm. 'Maybe he'd have to play the hero less frequently if you and your friends did it more often, Snapper,' he said.

Snapper rose to his feet menacingly slowly, but before he could say anything the Strong Man spoke up, quick as a child trying to settle his parents' quarrel. 'Suppose the Bluejay is right? Perhaps Her Ugliness really does want to help. She's always been good to us strolling players! She even used to come and visit our camp. And she feeds the poor and sends for the Barn Owl to come to the castle when the Milksop's had some unfortunate fellow's hand or foot chopped off!'

'Yes, very generous of her, isn't it?' Gecko made a mocking face, as he so often did when the Strong Man said anything, and the crow on his shoulder uttered a croak of derision. 'What's so generous about giving away kitchen scraps and clothes no one wants any more? Does Her Ugliness go around in rags like my mother and my sisters? No! I expect Balbulus has run out of parchment, and she wants to buy more with the price on the Bluejay's head!'

Once again some of the robbers laughed. As for the Strong Man, he looked uncertainly at the Black Prince. His brother whispered something to him, and scowled at Gecko. Please, Prince! thought Resa. Tell Mo to forget what Violante said. He'll listen to you. And help him to forget the Book he bound for her father! Please!

The Black Prince glanced at her as if he had heard her silent pleading. But his dark face remained inscrutable. She often found Mo's face impossible to read these days.

'Doria!' the Prince said. 'Do you think you can get past the castle guards and ask around among Violante's soldiers? One of them may have heard more about what the Piper is here for.'

The Strong Man opened his mouth as if to protest. He loved his brother and did all he could to protect him, but Doria was at

an age when a boy doesn't want protection any more.

'Of course. Easy,' he said with a smile that showed how happy he was to do as the Prince asked. 'I've known some of them ever since I could walk. Mostly they aren't much older than me.'

'Good.' The Black Prince stood up. His next words were for Mo, although he didn't look at him. 'As for Violante's offer, I agree with Gecko and Snapper. Violante may have a soft spot for strolling players and feel sorry for her subjects, but she's still her father's daughter, and we ought not to trust her.'

All eyes went to the Bluejay.

But Mo said nothing.

To Resa, that silence spoke louder than words. She knew it, just as Meggie did. Resa saw the fear on her daughter's face as she began talking earnestly to Mo. Yes, by now Meggie too probably felt what a hold this story had taken on her father. The letters were drawing him deeper and deeper down, like a whirlpool made of ink, and once again the terrible thought that had haunted Resa with increasing frequency these last few weeks came to her: that on the day when Mo had lain wounded in Capricorn's burnt-out fortress, close to death, perhaps the White Women really did take a part of him away with them to the place where Dustfinger had gone, and she would see that part of him again only there. In the place where all stories end.

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15

Loud Words, Soft Words

When you go, space closes over like water behind
you,
Do not look back: there is nothing outside you,
Space is only time visible in a different way,
Places we love we can never leave.

Ivan V. Lalic,
Places We Love

‘Please, Mo! Ask him!’

At first Meggie thought she had heard her mother’s voice only in a dream, one of the dark dreams that sometimes came to her out of the past. Resa sounded so desperate. But when Meggie opened her eyes she could still hear her voice. And when she looked out of the tent she saw her parents standing among the trees only a short way off, little more than

two shadows in the night. The oak against which Mo was leaning was huge, an oak such as Meggie had never seen outside the Inkworld, and Resa was clutching his arm as if to force him to listen to her.

‘Isn’t that what we’ve always done? When one of us didn’t like a story any more, we closed the book! Mo, have you forgotten how many books there are? Let’s find another to tell us its story, a book with words that will stay words and not make us a part of them!’

Meggie glanced at the robbers lying under the trees only a little way off. Many of them were sleeping in the open, although the nights were already very cold, but her mother’s despairing voice didn’t seem to have woken any of them.

‘If I remember correctly, I was the one who wanted to close this book long ago.’ Mo’s voice sounded as cool as the air making its way in through the tent’s ragged fabric. ‘But you and Meggie wouldn’t hear of another one.’

‘How was I to know what this story would turn you into?’ Resa’s voice sounded as if she hardly knew how to hold back her tears.

Go back to sleep, Meggie told herself. Leave the two of them alone. But she stayed where she was, freezing in the cold night air.

‘What are you talking about? What’s it supposed to have made me into?’

Mo spoke softly, as if he didn’t want to disturb the silence of the night, but Resa seemed to have forgotten where she was.

‘What’s it made you into?’ Her voice was rising with every word. ‘You wear a sword at your belt! You hardly sleep, you’re out all night. Do you think I can’t tell the cry of a real bluejay from a human imitation? I know how often Battista or the Strong Man came to fetch you when we were at the farm ... and the worst of it is, I know how happy you are to go with them. You’ve found you have a taste for danger! You went to Ombra

although the Prince warned you not to. And now you come back, after they almost caught you, and act as if it were all a game!’

‘What else is it?’ Mo was still speaking so softly that Meggie could hardly hear him. ‘Have you forgotten what this world is made of?’

‘I couldn’t care less what it’s made of. You can die in it, Mo. You know that better than I do. Or have you forgotten the White Women? No, you even talk about them in your sleep. Sometimes I almost think you miss them.’

Mo did not reply, but Meggie knew Resa was right. Mo had talked to her about the White Women only once. ‘They’re made of nothing but longing, Meggie,’ he had said. ‘They fill your heart to the brim with longing, until you just want to go with them, wherever they take you.’

‘Please, Mo!’ Resa’s voice was shaking. ‘Ask Fenoglio to write us back again! He’ll try to do it for you. He owes you that!’

One of the robbers coughed in his sleep, another moved closer to the fire ... and Mo said nothing. When at last he did reply he sounded as if he were talking to a child. Even to Meggie he didn’t speak like that. ‘Fenoglio isn’t writing at all these days, Resa. I’m not even sure whether he still can.’

‘Then go to Orpheus! You’ve heard what Farid says. Orpheus has written rainbow-coloured fairies into this world, and unicorns and—’

‘So? Maybe Orpheus can add something to Fenoglio’s story here and there. But he’d have to write something of his own to take us back to Elinor. I doubt if he can do that. And even if he can – from all Farid says, he’s not interested in anything but making himself the richest man in Ombra. Do you have the money to pay him for his words?’

This time it was Resa who remained silent – for so long that she might have been mute again, as she was when she left her voice behind in the Inkworld.

It was Mo who finally broke the silence.

‘Resa!’ he said. ‘If we go back now I’ll be sitting in Elinor’s house doing nothing but wondering how this story goes on, day in, day out. And no book in the world will be able to tell me that!’

‘You don’t just want to know how it goes on.’ Now it was Resa’s voice that sounded cool. ‘You want to decide what happens. You want to be part of it! But who knows whether you’ll ever find your way out of the letters on the page again, if you tangle yourself up in them even more?’

‘Even more? What do you mean? I’ve seen Death here, Resa – and I have a new life.’

‘If you won’t do it for me,’ – Meggie could hear how hard it was for her mother to go on – ‘then go back for Meggie ... and for our second child. I want my baby to have a father, I want the baby’s father to be alive when it’s born – and I want him to be the same man who brought its sister up.’

Once more Meggie had to wait a long time for Mo’s answer. A tawny owl hooted. Gecko’s crows cawed sleepily in the tree where they roosted at night. Fenoglio’s world seemed so peaceful. And Mo stroked the bark of the tree against which he was leaning, as tenderly as he usually caressed the spine of a book.

‘How do you know Meggie doesn’t want to stay? She’s almost grown up. And in love. Do you think she wants to go back while Farid stays here? Because stay he will.’

In love. Meggie’s face was burning. She didn’t want Mo to say what she herself had never put into words. In love – it sounded like a sickness without any cure, and wasn’t that just how it sometimes felt? Yes, Farid would stay. She had so often told herself that, when she felt a wish to go back: Farid will stay even if Dustfinger doesn’t return from the dead. He’ll go on looking for him and longing for him, much more than he longs for you, Meggie. But how would it feel never to see him again?

Would she leave her heart here and go around with an empty hole in her breast ever after? Would she stay alone – like Elinor – and only read about being in love in books?

‘She’ll get over it!’ she heard Resa say. ‘She’ll fall in love with someone else.’

What was her mother talking about? She doesn’t know me! thought Meggie. She never knew me. How could she? She was never there with us.

‘What about your second child?’ Resa went on. ‘Do you want the baby born in this world?’

Mo looked round him, and once more Meggie felt something she had long known: by now her father loved this world as much as she and Resa had once done. Perhaps he even loved it more.

‘Why not?’ he retorted. ‘Do you want it born in a world where what it longs for can be found only in books?’

Resa’s voice shook when she replied, but now it was with anger. ‘How can you say such a thing? Everything you find here was born in our world. Where else did Fenoglio get it all from?’

‘How should I know? Do you really still think there’s only one real world, and the others are just pale offshoots?’

Somewhere a wolf howled and two others responded. One of the guards came through the trees and put wood on the dying fire. His name was Wayfarer. None of the robbers went by the names they had been born with. He moved away again, after casting a curious glance at Mo and Resa.

‘I don’t want to go back, Resa. Not now!’ Mo’s voice sounded determined, but at the same time Meggie could tell he was trying to win her mother over, as if he still hoped to convince her that they were in the right place. ‘It will be months yet before the baby’s born, and maybe we’ll all be back in Elinor’s house by then. But right now, this is where I want to be.’

He kissed Resa on the forehead. Then he went away, over to the men standing on guard among the trees at the far end of the camp. And Resa dropped into the grass where she stood and buried her face in her hands. Meggie wanted to go to her and comfort her, but what could she say? *I want to stay with Farid, Resa. I don't want to find someone else.* No, that would hardly be much comfort to her mother. And Mo didn't come back either.



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16

The Piper's Offer

The moment comes when a character does or says something you hadn't thought about. At that moment he's alive and you leave it to him.

Graham Greene,
Advice to Writers

At last. Here they came. Trumpets rang out in a fanfare from the city gates, an arrogant metallic sound. Just like the man it announced, Fenoglio thought. The Milksop – the common people always found the most suitable names. He couldn't have thought of a better one himself, but then he hadn't invented this pallid upstart either! Not even the Adderhead had his arrival announced by long-stemmed trumpets, but his pigeon-chested brother-in-law had only to ride around the castle and they struck up.

Fenoglio drew Minerva's children closer to his side. Despina didn't mind at all, but her brother wriggled out of Fenoglio's grasp and climbed up, nimble as a squirrel, to a ledge on the wall where he would have a view down the street along which they'd soon be coming. The Milksop and his retinue, also known to the townsfolk as his pack of hounds. Had the Adder's brother-in-law already been told that almost all the women of Ombra were waiting for him at the castle gate? Yes, surely.

Why is the Piper counting our children? That was the question that had brought them here. They had already called it out to the guards, whose faces were unmoved and who had merely lowered their spears in the direction of the angry women. But the women hadn't gone home, all the same.

It was Friday, the day when the hunt rode out, and the crowd had been waiting hours for the return of their new master, who had set about killing all the game in the Wayless Wood from the moment of his arrival. Once again his servants would be carrying dozens of bloodstained partridges, wild boar, deer and hares through the streets of starving Ombra, past women who hardly knew where to find food for the next day. That was why Fenoglio hardly ever went out of doors, and even less on Fridays than on any other day of the week, but curiosity had brought him here today. Curiosity – a tiresome feeling!

'Fenoglio,' Minerva had said, 'can you look after Despina and Ivo? I have to go to the castle. We're all going. We want to make them tell us why the Piper is counting our children.'

You know why, Fenoglio wanted to say. But the desperation on Minerva's face silenced him. Let them hope their children weren't wanted for the silver mines, he told himself. Leave it to the Milksop and the Piper to take their hope away.

Oh, how tired he was of all this! He'd tried his hand at writing again yesterday, roused to anger by the arrogant smile with which the Piper rode into Ombra. He had picked up one of the sharpened pens that the glass man still placed

encouragingly in front of him, sat down in front of a blank sheet of paper, and after an hour of waiting in vain told Rosenquartz off for buying paper that anyone could see was made of old trousers.

Ah, Fenoglio, he wondered, how many more stupid excuses will you think up for the way you've turned into an old man with no power over words any more?

Yes, he admitted it. He wanted to be master of this story, strongly as he had denied it after Cosimo's death. More and more often these days he set to work with pen and ink in search of the old magic – usually while the glass man was snoring in his fairy nest, because it was too embarrassing to have Rosenquartz as a witness of his failure. He tried it when Minerva had to give the children soup tasting little better than dishwater, when the horrible rainbow-coloured fairies jabbered away in their nest at the tops of their voices, keeping him awake, or when one of his creations – like the Piper yesterday – reminded him of the days when he had woven this world out of letters, intoxicated by his own skill with words.

But the paper stayed blank – as if all the words had stolen away to Orpheus, just because he took them and savoured them on his tongue. Had life ever tasted so bitter before?

In Fenoglio's gloomy mood he had even played with the idea of going back to that village in the other world, such a peaceful, well-fed place, so wonderfully free of fairies and stirring events, back to his grandchildren, who must be missing his stories. (And what fabulous stories he'd be able to tell them now!) But where could the words be found that would take him back? Certainly not in his empty old head, and he could hardly ask Orpheus to write them for him. He hadn't sunk as low as that yet.

Despina tugged at his sleeve. Cosimo had given him the tunic he was wearing, but it too was moth-eaten now, and as dusty as his brain that wouldn't think. What was he doing here outside

this damn castle? The sight of it depressed him. Why wasn't he lying in bed?

'Fenoglio? Is it true that when people dig silver out of the ground they spit blood on it?' Despina's voice still reminded him of a little bird's. 'Ivo says I'm just the right size for the tunnels where they find most of the silver.'

Damn the boy! Why did he tell his little sister such stories?

'How often have I told you not to believe a word your brother says?' Fenoglio tucked Despina's thick black hair back behind her ears, and looked accusingly at Ivo. Poor fatherless little thing.

'Why shouldn't I tell her? She asked me!' Ivo was at the age when you despise even comforting lies. 'I don't expect they'll take you,' he said, leaning down to his sister. 'Girls die too quickly. But they'll take me and Beppo and Lino, and even Mungus, although he limps. The Piper will take us all. And then they'll bring us back dead just like our—'

Despina put her hand over his mouth quickly, as if her father might come back to life if only her brother didn't speak the bad word. Fenoglio could happily have seized and shaken the boy, but Despina would only have burst into tears on the spot. Did all little sisters adore their brothers?

'That's enough! Stop upsetting your sister!' he snapped at Ivo. 'The Piper's here to catch the Bluejay. Not for anything else. And to ask the Milksop why he isn't sending more silver to the Castle of Night.'

'Oh yes? Then why are they counting us?' The boy had grown up in the last few weeks. As if grief had wiped away the childishness on his face. At the tender age of ten, Ivo was now the man of the family – even if Fenoglio sometimes tried to lift the burden of that responsibility off his thin shoulders. The boy worked with the dyers, helped to pull wet fabric through the stinking vats day in, day out, and brought the smell home with

him in the evening. But he earned more with that work than Fenoglio did as a scribe in the marketplace.

‘They’re going to kill us all!’ he went on unmoved, his eyes fixed on the guards, who were still pointing their spears at the waiting women. ‘And they’ll tear the Bluejay to pieces, like they did last week with the strolling player who threw rotten vegetables at the governor. They fed the pieces to the hounds.’

‘Ivo!’ This was too much. Fenoglio tried to grab him by the ears, but the boy was too quick for him and ran away before he could get a hold. However, his sister stood there squeezing Fenoglio’s hand as tightly as if there were nothing else for her to cling to in this shattered world.

‘They won’t catch him, will they?’ Despina’s little voice was so timid that Fenoglio had to bend down to hear what she was saying. ‘The bear protects the Bluejay now as well as the Black Prince, doesn’t he?’

‘Of course!’ Fenoglio stroked her jet-black hair again. The sound of hoof beats was coming up the street, echoing among the houses, with voices chatting as casually as if they scorned the silence of the women waiting there, while the sun sank behind the surrounding hills and turned the roofs of Ombra red. The noble lords were late coming back from the pleasures of the hunt today, their silver-embroidered garments spattered with blood, their bored hearts comfortably aroused by killing. Death could indeed be a great entertainer – when it was someone else’s death.

The women crowded closer together. The guards drove them back from the gates, but they stayed outside the castle walls: old women, young women, mothers, daughters, grandmothers. Minerva was one of those in front. She had grown thin in the last few weeks. Fenoglio’s story, that man-eating monster, was eating her alive. But Minerva had smiled when she heard that the Bluejay had gone to see some books in the castle and ridden away unscathed.

‘He will save us!’ she had whispered. In the evenings she sang, low-voiced, the songs going around Ombra, and very bad songs they were. About the White Hand and the Black Hand of Justice, the Jay and the Prince ... a bookbinder and a knife-thrower against the Piper and his army of fire-raising men-at-arms. But why not? After all, didn’t that sound like a good story?

Fenoglio picked Despina up as the soldiers escorting the hunting party rode by. Strolling players followed them down the street: pipers, drummers, jugglers, brownie-tamers, and of course Sootbird, who wasn’t going to miss any fun, even if – so they said – he felt ill at the sight of people being blinded and quartered. Then came the hounds, dappled like the light in the Wayless Wood, with the kennel-boys who made sure the dogs were hungry on the day of the hunt, and finally the hunters, led by the Milksop, a skinny figure on a horse much too large for him. He was as ugly as his sister was said to be beautiful, with a pointed nose that seemed too short for his face and a wide, pinched mouth. No one knew why the Adderhead had made him, of all men, lord of Ombra. Perhaps it had been at the request of his sister who, after all, had given the Silver Prince his first son. But Fenoglio suspected it was more likely that the Adderhead had chosen his puny brother-in-law because he could be sure the Milksop would never rise against him.

What a feeble character, thought Fenoglio scornfully as the Milksop rode by with a supercilious expression on his face. Obviously this story was now filling even leading roles with cheap supporting actors.

As expected, the fine ladies and gentlemen had brought back plenty of game: partridges dangling from the poles to which the grooms had tied them like fruit that had just fallen, half a dozen of the deer he had thought up especially for this world, with reddish-brown coats that were still as dappled as a fawn’s even in old age (not that these animals had been particularly old), hares, stags, wild boar ...

The women of Ombra stared at the slaughtered game expressionlessly. Many put a telltale hand to their empty stomachs, or glanced at their ever-hungry children waiting in doorways for their mothers.

And then – then they carried the unicorn past.

Damn that Cheesehead!

There were no unicorns in Fenoglio's world, but Orpheus had written one here just so that the Milksop could kill it. Fenoglio quickly put his hand over Despina's eyes when they carried it by, its white coat pierced and bloodstained. Rosenquartz had told him not quite a week ago about the Milksop's commission. The fee for it had been high, and all Ombra had wondered what distant country Four-Eyes had brought that fairy-tale creature from.

A unicorn! What stories could have been told about it! But the Milksop wasn't paying for stories, quite apart from the fact that Orpheus couldn't have written them. He did it with my words, thought Fenoglio. With my words! He felt fury clenched like a stone in his belly. If he only had the money to hire a couple of thieves to steal the book which supplied that parasite with words! His own book! Or if, at least, he could have written a few treasures for himself! But he couldn't manage even that – he, Fenoglio, formerly court poet to Cosimo the Fair and creator of this once-magnificent world! Tears of self-pity came to his eyes, and he imagined them carrying Orpheus past, stabbed and bloodstained like the unicorn. Oh, yes!

'Why are you counting our children? We want you to stop it!'

Minerva's voice brought Fenoglio out of his vengeful daydreams. When she saw her mother step in front of the horses Despina wound her thin little arms so tightly around his neck that he could hardly breathe. Had Minerva lost her wits? Did she want her children to be not just fatherless but motherless too?

A woman riding just behind the Milksop pointed her gloved finger at Minerva with her bare feet and shabby dress. The guards moved towards her with their spears.

For heaven's sake, Minerva! Fenoglio's heart was in his mouth. Despina began crying, but it wasn't her sobs that made Minerva stumble back. Unnoticed, the Piper had appeared on the battlements above the gateway.

'You ask why we're counting your children?' he called down to the women.

As always, he was magnificently dressed. Even the Milksop looked like a mere valet by comparison. He stood on the battlements shimmering like a peacock with four crossbow-men beside him. Perhaps he had been up there for some time, watching to see how his master's brother-in-law would deal with the women waiting for him. His hoarse voice carried a long way in the silence that suddenly fell on Ombra.

'We count everything that's ours!' he cried. 'Sheep, cows, chickens, women, children, men – not that you have many of those left – fields, barns, stables, houses. We count every tree in your forest. After all, the Adderhead likes to know what he's ruling over.'

His silver nose still looked like a beak in the middle of his face. There were tales saying that the Adderhead had ordered a silver heart to be made for his herald too, but Fenoglio felt sure there was still a human heart beating in the Piper's breast. Nothing was more cruel than a heart made of flesh and blood, because it knew what gives pain.

'You don't want them for the mines?' The woman who spoke up this time did not step forward like Minerva, but hid among the others. The Piper did not answer at once. He examined his fingernails. The Piper was proud of his pink nails. They were as well manicured as a woman's, just as Fenoglio had described them. In spite of everything, it was still exciting to see his characters acting exactly as he had imagined.

You soak them in rosewater every evening, you villain, thought Fenoglio, as Despina stared at the Piper like a bird staring at the cat that wants to eat it. And you wear them as long as the nails of the ladies who keep the Milksop company.

‘For the mines? What a delightful idea!’

It was so quiet now that the silver-nosed man didn’t even have to raise his voice. In the setting sun his shadow fell over the women, long and black. Very effective, Fenoglio thought. And how stupid the Milksop looked. The Piper was keeping him waiting outside his own gates like a servant. What a scene. But this one wasn’t his own invention ...

‘Ah, I understand! You think that’s why the Adderhead sent me here!’ The Piper leant his hands on the wall and looked down from the battlements, like a beast of prey wondering whether the Milksop or one of the women would taste better. ‘No, no. I’m here to catch a bird, and you all know the colour of its feathers. Although, as I hear, he was black as a raven during his last impudent exploit. As soon as that bird is caught, I’ll be riding back to the other side of the forest. Isn’t that so, Governor?’

The Milksop looked up at him and adjusted his sword, still bloodstained from the hunt. ‘If you say so!’ he called in a voice that he could control only with difficulty. He glanced angrily at the women outside the gates, as if he’d never seen anything like them before.

‘I do say so.’ The Piper smiled condescendingly down on the Milksop. ‘But on the other hand,’ he said, and the pause before he continued seemed endless, ‘if this bird should escape capture once more ...’ He paused again, for a long time, as if he wanted to inspect each of the waiting women thoroughly. ‘If any of those present here should go so far as to give him shelter and a roof over his head, warn him of our patrols, sing songs of how he pulls the wool over our eyes ...’ The sigh he heaved came from the depths of his breast. ‘Well, in that case, no doubt I’d

have to take your children with me in his place, for after all, I can't go back to the Castle of Night empty-handed, can I?'

Oh, the confounded silver-nosed bastard.

Why didn't you make him more stupid, Fenoglio? Because stupid villains are so boring, he answered himself, and was ashamed of it when he saw the despair on the women's faces.

'So you see, it's entirely up to you!' The strained voice still had something of the slushy sweetness for which Capricorn had loved it so much. 'Help me to catch the bird that the Adderhead longs to hear singing in his castle, and you can keep your children. Otherwise ...' He wearily signed to the guards, and the Milksop, his face rigid with fury, rode towards the gates as they opened. 'Otherwise, I am afraid I'll have to remember that there is indeed always a need for small hands in our silver mines.'

The women were still staring at him with faces as empty of emotion as if there simply were no room in them for yet more despair.

'What are you still standing there for?' called the Piper as the servants carried the Milksop's dead game through the gateway below. 'Go away! Or I'll have boiling water poured over you. Not a bad idea at all, since I'm sure you could all do with a bath.'

As if numbed, the women moved back, looking up at the battlements as though the cauldrons were already heating up.

The last time Fenoglio's heart had raced like this was when the soldiers had appeared in Balbulus's workshop to take Mortimer away with them. He examined the faces of the women, the beggars crouching beside the pillory outside the castle walls, the frightened children, and fear spread through him. All the rewards set on Mortimer's head had not yet been able to buy the Silver Prince an informer in Ombra, but what now? What mother would not betray the Bluejay for her own child's sake?

A beggar pushed his way through the crowd of women, and as he limped past Fenoglio recognized him as one of the Black Prince's spies. Good, he thought. Mortimer will soon know about the deal the Piper has offered the women of Ombra. But then what?

The Milksop's hunting party was moving on through the open castle gates, and the women set off for home, heads lowered, as if already ashamed of the act of betrayal the Piper had demanded of them.

'Fenoglio?' A woman stopped in front of him. He didn't know who she was until she pushed back the scarf that she had tied over her pinned-up hair like a peasant woman.

'Resa? What are you doing here?' Fenoglio instinctively looked round in alarm, but Mortimer's wife had obviously come without her husband.

'I've been looking for you everywhere!'

Despina clung around Fenoglio's neck and stared curiously at the strange woman. 'That lady looks like Meggie,' she whispered to him.

'Yes, because she's Meggie's mother.' Fenoglio put Despina down as Minerva came towards him. She was walking slowly, as if she felt dizzy, and Ivo ran to her and put his arm protectively around her.

'Fenoglio!' Resa took his arm. 'I have to speak to you!'

What about? It couldn't be anything good.

'Minerva, you go ahead,' he said. 'It will be all right, wait and see,' he added, but Minerva just looked at him as if he were one of her children. Then she took Despina's hand and followed her son, who was running on ahead. She walked as unsteadily as if the Piper's words were splinters of glass under her feet.

'Tell me your husband is hidden deep, deep in the forest and not planning any more idiocy like that visit to Balbulus!' Fenoglio whispered to Resa as he led her away with him into

Bakers' Alley. It still smelt of fresh bread and cake there, a tormenting aroma for most of the people of Ombra, who hadn't been able to afford such delicacies for a long time.

Resa covered her hair with the scarf again, and looked round as if she were afraid the Piper had come down from the battlements and was following her, but only a thin cat slunk past. Once there had been a great many pigs in the streets too, but they had been eaten long ago, most of them up at the castle.

'I need your help!' Good God, how desperate she sounded! 'You must write us home again. You owe us that! It's your songs that have put Mo in danger, and it's getting worse every day! You heard what the Piper said!'

'Stop, stop, stop!' He blamed himself often enough these days, but Fenoglio still didn't like to be blamed by others. And this accusation really was surely unjust. 'I never brought Mortimer here, Orpheus did. I really couldn't foresee that my inspiration for the Bluejay would suddenly be walking around here in flesh and blood!'

'But it happened!' One of the night watchmen who lit the lanterns was coming down the street. Darkness fell fast in Ombra. Another banquet would soon be beginning in the castle, and Sootbird's fire would stink to high heaven.

'If you won't do it for me,' said Resa, doing her best to sound composed, but Fenoglio could see the tears in her eyes, 'then do it for Meggie ... and the brother or sister she's soon going to have.'

Another child? Fenoglio instinctively glanced at Resa's belly as if he could already see a new character in the story there. Was there no end to its complications?

'Fenoglio, please!'

What was he to say in reply? Should he tell her about the sheet of paper still lying blank on his table – or even admit that he liked the way her husband played the part he had written for

him, that the Bluejay was his sole comfort in these dark days, the only one of his ideas that worked really well? No, better not.

‘Did Mortimer send you?’

She avoided his eyes.

‘Resa, does he want to leave too?’ Leave this world of mine? he added in his thoughts. My world, still fabulous even if it’s in a certain amount of turmoil at the moment? For, yes, Fenoglio knew only too well that he himself still loved it, despite its darkness. Perhaps *because* of its darkness. No. No, that wasn’t why ... or was it?

‘He *must* leave! Can’t you see that?’ The last of the daylight was fading from the streets. The buildings stood very close together, and it was cold, and as still as if all Ombra were thinking of the Piper’s threat. Shivering, Resa drew her cloak around her. ‘Your words ... they’re changing him!’

‘Oh, come on. Words don’t change anyone!’ Fenoglio’s voice sounded louder than he had intended. ‘Maybe my words have taught your husband things about himself he never knew before, but they were there all the time, and if he likes them now you can hardly call it my fault! Ride back, tell him what the Piper offered, say he’d better avoid anything like that visit to Balbulus in the near future, and for God’s sake don’t worry. He’s playing his part very well! He plays it better than any of the other characters I made up, except maybe the Black Prince. Your husband is a hero in this world! What man wouldn’t wish for that?’

The way she was looking at him, as if he were an old fool who didn’t know what he was talking about! ‘You know very well how heroes end up,’ she said, carefully controlling her voice. ‘They don’t have wives or children, and they don’t grow old. Find yourself another man to play the hero in your story, but leave my husband out of it! You must write us all back! Tonight!’

He hardly knew where to look. Her gaze was so clear – just like her daughter's. Meggie had always looked at him like that. A candle flared into life in the window above them. His world was sinking into darkness. Night was falling – close the curtains, tomorrow the story will go on ...

‘I’m sorry, but I can’t help you. I’ll never be able to write again. It brings nothing but misfortune, and there’s enough of that here already.’

What a coward he was. Too cowardly for the truth. Why didn’t he tell her that the words had abandoned him, that she was asking the wrong man? But Resa seemed to know it anyway. He saw so many emotions mingled on her face: anger, disappointment, fear – and defiance. Like her daughter, thought Fenoglio again. So uncompromising, so strong. Women were different, no doubt about it. Men broke so much more quickly. Grief didn’t break women. Instead it wore them down, it hollowed them out, very slowly. That was what it was doing to Minerva ...

‘Very well.’ Resa was in control of her voice, although it shook. ‘Then I’ll go to Orpheus. He can write unicorns into this world, he brought us all here. Why shouldn’t he be able to send us home again too?’

If you can pay him, thought Fenoglio, but he didn’t say it aloud. Orpheus would send her packing. He saved his words for the ladies and gentlemen in the castle who paid for his expensive clothes and his maids. No, she’d have to stay, and so would Mortimer and Meggie – and a good thing too, because who else was going to read his words, supposing they did obey him again some day. And who was to kill the Adderhead if not the Bluejay?

Yes, they had to stay. It was better that way.

‘Off you go to Orpheus, then,’ he said. ‘And I wish you luck with him.’ He turned his back to her, so that he wouldn’t have to see the despair in her eyes any longer. Did he detect a trace

of contempt there too? 'But you'd better not ride back in the dark,' he added. 'The roads are more dangerous every day.'

Then he left her. Minerva would be waiting with supper. He didn't turn back. He knew only too well how Resa would be gazing after him. Exactly like her daughter ...



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17

The Wrong Fear

You wish for something you don't really want, the dream says.

Bad dream. Punish him. Chase him from the house.

Tie him to the horses, let him run with them.

Hang him. He deserves it.

Feed him mushrooms. Poisonous ones.

Paavo Haavikko,
The Trees Breathe Gently

Mo had spent two whole days and nights with Battista and the Black Prince looking for a place where a hundred or more children could be hidden. With the bear's help, they had finally found a cave. But it was a long way off. The mountainside where the cave lay concealed was steep and

almost impassable, especially for children's feet, and a pack of wolves roamed the ravine next to it, but there was some hope that neither the Milksop's hounds nor the Piper would find them there. Not a great deal of hope, but for the first time in many days Mo's heart felt a little lighter.

Hope. Nothing is more intoxicating. And hardly any hope was sweeter than the prospect of giving the Piper an unpleasant surprise and humiliating him in front of his immortal master.

They wouldn't have to hide all the children, of course, but many, very many of them must be hidden. If all went according to plan, Ombra would soon be not just without men but almost entirely without children, and the Piper would have to go from one remote farm to another if he wanted to steal any, hoping the Black Prince's men hadn't been there ahead of him helping the women to hide their little ones.

Yes, much would be gained if they succeeded in getting the children of Ombra to safety, and Mo was almost in high spirits as they returned to the camp. But when Meggie came to meet him with anxiety on her face, that mood was gone at once. Obviously there was more bad news.

Meggie's voice shook as she told him about the deal the Piper had offered the women of Ombra. *The Bluejay in exchange for your children.* The Black Prince didn't have to tell Mo what that meant. Instead of helping to hide the children, he himself would have to hide from every woman who had a child of the right age.

'You'd better take to living in the trees!' hiccupped Gecko. He was drunk, presumably on the wine they had stolen only last week from a couple of the Milksop's friends out hunting. 'After all, you can fly up there. Don't folk say that's how you escaped from Balbulus's workshop?'

Mo would happily have punched his drunken mouth, but Meggie reached for his hand, and the anger that sprang up in

him so quickly these days ebbed away when he saw the fear on his daughter's face.

‘What will you do now, Mo?’ she whispered.

What indeed? He didn't know the answer. All he knew was that he would rather ride to the Castle of Night and surrender than hide. He quickly turned away so that Meggie wouldn't read his thoughts on his face, but she knew him so well. Too well.

‘Perhaps Resa's right after all!’ she whispered to him, while Gecko stared at them with bloodshot eyes, and even the Black Prince couldn't conceal his anxiety. ‘Perhaps,’ she added, almost inaudibly, ‘we really ought to go back home to Elinor, Mo!’

She'd heard him and Resa quarrelling.

Involuntarily, he looked round for Resa, but he couldn't see her anywhere.

What will you do now, Mo?

Yes, what indeed? How was the last song about the Bluejay to go? *But they never caught the Jay, however hard they looked for him. He disappeared without trace, as if he had never been. However, he left the Book behind, the White Book that he had bound for the Adderhead, and with it the Adder's immortal tyranny.* No, that must not be the last song. No? What, then? *But one day a mother, fearing for her children, gave the Bluejay away. And he died the worst of all deaths ever suffered by any man in the Castle of Night.* Was that a better end to the story? Was there any better end at all?

‘Come along!’ Battista put an arm around his shoulders. ‘I suggest we get drunk to drown this news. If the others have left any of the Milksop's wine, that is. Forget the Piper, forget the Adderhead, drown them all in good red wine.’

But Mo didn't feel like drinking, even if the wine silenced the voice he kept hearing inside himself since his quarrel with Resa. *I don't want to go back,* it said. *No, not yet ...*

Gecko staggered back to the fire and pushed in between Snapper and Elfbane. They'd soon start fighting again; they always did when they were drunk.

'I'm going to get some sleep. That clears the head better than wine,' said the Black Prince. 'We'll talk tomorrow.'

The bear lay down outside his master's tent and looked at Mo.

Tomorrow.

What now, Mortimer?

It was getting colder every day. His breath was white vapour hanging in the air as he looked around for Resa again. Where was she? He'd picked her a flower with a shallow cup, pale blue, a species she hadn't yet drawn. Fairyglass, people called it, because it collected so much morning dew in its soft petals that the fairies used it as a mirror.

'Meggie, have you seen your mother?' he asked.

But Meggie didn't reply. Doria had brought her some of the wild boar that was roasting over the fire. It looked like a particularly good piece of meat. The boy whispered something to her. Was it his imagination, or had a rosy flush just risen to his daughter's face? In any case, she hadn't heard his question.

'Meggie, do you know where Resa is?' Mo repeated, taking great care not to smile when Doria cast him a quick and rather anxious glance. He was a good-looking lad, a little smaller than Farid, but stronger. Presumably he was wondering whether the songs about the Bluejay told the truth when they said he guarded his daughter like the apple of his eye. No, more like the finest of all books, thought Mo, and I sincerely hope you're not going to give her as much grief as Farid, because if you do the Bluejay will feed you to the Prince's bear without the slightest hesitation!

Luckily Meggie hadn't read his thoughts this time. 'Resa?' She tasted the roast meat and thanked Doria with a smile. 'She rode

over to see Roxane.'

'Roxane? But Roxane is here.' Mo glanced at the tent used as an infirmary for the sick. One of the robbers was in there, curled up in pain – probably from eating poisonous fungi – and Roxane stood outside the tent talking to two women who were nursing him.

Meggie looked at her, bewildered. 'But Resa said she'd arranged to meet Roxane.'

Mo pinned the flower that had been meant for her mother to Meggie's dress. 'How long has she been gone?' He did his best to sound casual, but Meggie was not to be deceived. Not by him.

'She set out around midday! If she's not with Roxane, then where is she?'

She was looking at him in bewilderment. No, she really had no idea. He kept forgetting that she didn't know Resa nearly as well as she knew him. A year was not a particularly long time to get acquainted with your own mother.

Have you forgotten our quarrel? he wanted to reply. She's gone to see Fenoglio. But he bit back the words. Fear made his chest feel tight, and he'd only too gladly have believed it was fear for Resa. But he was as bad at lying to himself as to anyone else. He was not afraid for his wife, although he had reason to be. He feared that, somewhere in Ombra, the words were already being read aloud that would take him back to his old world, like a fish caught in a river and flung back into the pond it came from ... Don't be stupid, Mortimer, he thought angrily. Who is going to read the words, even if Fenoglio really did write them for Resa? Well, a voice inside him whispered, who do you think?

Orpheus.

Meggie was still looking at him in concern, while Doria stood beside her hesitantly, unable to take his eyes off her face.

Mo turned. 'I'll be back soon,' he said.

'Where are you going? Mo!'

Meggie hurried after him when she saw him go over to the horses, but he did not turn again.

Why in such a hurry, Mortimer? the voice inside him mocked. Do you think you can ride faster than Orpheus can speak the words with his oily tongue? Darkness was falling from the sky like a scarf, a dark scarf smothering everything, the colours, the birdsong ... Resa. Where was she? Still in Ombra, or on her way back already? And suddenly he felt the other fear – as bad as the fear of those words. The fear of footpads and nocturnal spirits, the memory of women they had found dead in the bushes. Had she at least taken the Strong Man with her? Mo uttered a quiet curse. No, of course not. He was sitting there with Battista and Wayfarer by the fire, and he had already drunk so much that he was beginning to sing.

He ought to have known. Resa had been very quiet since their quarrel. Had he forgotten what that meant? He knew that silence of hers. But he had gone off with the Black Prince instead of talking to her again about what made her so silent – almost as silent as in the days when she had lost her voice.

'Mo, what are you doing?' Meggie's voice sounded faint with fear. Doria had followed them. Meggie whispered something to him, and he set off towards the Prince's tent.

'Damn it, Meggie, what's the idea of that?' Mo tightened the horse's girth. He wished his fingers weren't shaking so much.

'Where are you going to look for her? You can't leave this camp! Have you forgotten the Piper?'

She clung to him. Then Doria came back with the Prince. Mo cursed and put the horse's reins over its head.

'What are you doing?' The Black Prince stopped behind him, the bear at his side.

'I have to go to Ombra.'

‘Ombra?’ The Prince gently moved Meggie aside and reached for the reins.

What was he to say to him? Prince, my wife wants Fenoglio to write words that will make me disappear before your eyes, words that will turn the Bluejay back to what he once was – nothing but an old man’s invention, vanishing as suddenly as he appeared?

‘This is suicide. You’re not immortal, whatever the songs say. This is real life. Don’t forget that.’

Real life. What’s that, Prince?

‘Resa has ridden to Ombra. She set out hours ago. She’s alone, and it’s night. I must go after her.’

... and find out if the words have already been written. Written and read aloud.

‘But the Piper’s there. Are you going to make him a present of yourself? Let me send some men after her.’

‘Which men? They’re all drunk.’

Mo listened to the night air. He thought he could already hear the words that would send him back – words as powerful as those that had once protected him from the White Women. Above him the withering foliage rustled in the wind, and the drunken voices of the robbers by the fire came to him. The air smelt of resin, autumn leaves and the fragrant moss that grew in Fenoglio’s forest. Even in winter it was still covered with tiny white flowers that tasted like honey if you crushed them in your fingers. *I don’t want to go back, Resa.*

A wolf howled in the mountains. Meggie turned her head in alarm. She was afraid of wolves, like her mother. I hope she stayed in Ombra, thought Mo. Even if that means I have to pass the guards. *Let’s go back, Mo. Please!*

He swung himself up on the horse. Before he could stop her, Meggie was up there too, sitting behind him. As determined as

her mother ... she put her arms around him so firmly that he didn't even try to persuade her to stay behind.

'Do you see that, bear?' asked the Prince. 'Do you know what it means? It means there'll soon be a new song – about the Bluejay's sheer pig-headedness, and how the Black Prince sometimes has to protect him from himself.'

There were still two men sober enough to ride. Doria came too, getting up behind the Prince on his horse without a word. He wore a sword that was too large for him, but he could handle it well, and he was as fearless as Farid. They would be in Ombra before it was light, although the moon now stood high in the sky.

But words were so much faster than any horse.



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18

A Dangerous Ally

All day long he was docile, intelligent, good
Though sometimes changing to a darker mood
He seemed hypocritical, could tell bitter lies,
In the dark he saw dots of colour behind closed eyes,
Clenched his fists, put his tongue out at his elder
brother ...

Arthur Rimbaud,
The Poet at Seven Years Old

When Resa arrived Farid had just taken Orpheus his second bottle of wine. Cheeseface was celebrating. He was drinking to himself and his genius, as he called it. 'A unicorn! A perfect unicorn, snorting, pawing the ground with its hooves, ready to put its silly head in a virgin's lap any time!

Why do you think there weren't any unicorns in this world, Oss? Because Fenoglio couldn't write them! Fluttering fairies, hairy brownies, glass men, yes, but no unicorns.'

Farid would happily have tipped the wine over Orpheus's white shirt to make it as red as the coat of the unicorn. The unicorn brought into this world by Orpheus only for the Milksop to kill it. Farid had seen it. He had been on the way to Orpheus's tailor to get yet another pair of trousers that had become too tight for Cheesehead altered. When they carried the unicorn by, he had felt so sick at the sight of those dull eyes that he had to sit down in a doorway. Murderer. Farid had been listening when Orpheus read the words that had brought it to life, such beautiful words that he had stood as if rooted to the spot outside the study door. *It came through the trees, white as wild jasmine flowers. And the fairies danced around it in dense swarms, as if they had been waiting, full of longing, for its arrival.*

Orpheus's voice had shown Farid the horn, the waving mane, had made him hear the unicorn snorting and scraping at the frozen grass with its hooves. For three whole days he had actually thought it might have been a good idea after all to bring Orpheus here. Three days, if he had counted them correctly – that was as long as the unicorn lived before the Milksop's hounds chased it onto the huntsmen's spears. Or was the tale Brianna told down in the kitchen the true version: that one of Sootbird's lovers had lured it to them with her smile?

Oss opened the door to Resa. When Farid looked past him, wondering who was knocking at such a late hour, he thought at first that the pale face emerging from the darkness was Meggie's. She looked so like her mother now.

'Is Orpheus at home?'

Resa spoke in a low voice, as if ashamed of every word she said, and when she saw Farid behind the Chunk she lowered her head like a child caught in the act of doing something forbidden.

What did she want with Cheeseface?

‘Please tell him that Silvertongue’s wife has to speak to him.’

When Oss showed her into the entrance hall Resa gave Farid a fleeting smile, but she avoided looking directly at him. Without a word, the Chunk indicated that she was to wait there, and stomped up the stairs. Resa’s averted face told Farid that she wasn’t going to tell him the reason for her visit, so he followed Oss, hoping to hear more in Orpheus’s room.

Cheeseface was not alone when his bodyguard told him about his late-night visitor. There were three girls with Orpheus, none of them much older than Meggie, and they had been cooing at him for hours, telling him how clever, important and irresistible he was. The oldest was sitting on his plump knees, and Orpheus was kissing and fondling her so grossly that Farid would have liked to strike his fingers away. He was always being sent out to bring Orpheus the prettiest girls in Ombra. ‘What are you making such a fuss about?’ he had snapped, when Farid had at first refused to serve him in such a way. ‘They inspire me. Haven’t you ever heard of Muses? Off you go, or I’ll never find the words you want so much!’ So Farid obeyed him and took the girls who looked at him in the streets and the marketplace to Orpheus’s house. And many of them did look at Farid; after all, nearly all the older boys in Ombra were either dead or served Violante. Most of them would go anywhere Farid took them for a few coins. They all had hungry brothers and sisters and mothers who needed the money. Some just wanted to be able to buy a new dress again.

‘Silvertongue’s wife?’ You could tell from Orpheus’s voice that he had already put away a whole bottle of heavy red wine, but his eyes still looked surprisingly clear through his thick glasses. One of the girls touched the glasses with her finger, as cautiously as if she were afraid that doing so might turn her into glass herself on the spot.

‘Interesting. Bring her in. And you three, be off with you.’

Orpheus pushed the girl off his knees and smoothed his clothes down. Conceited bullfrog! Farid thought, pretending to have difficulty with the cork in the new wine bottle so that Orpheus wouldn't send him out of the room.

When Oss showed Resa in, the three girls hurried past her as if their mothers had caught them on Orpheus's lap.

'Well, what a surprise! Do sit down!' Orpheus waved to one of the chairs that had been specially made with his initials on them, and raised his eyebrows to express his surprise even further. He had rehearsed this little move, and that wasn't the only one. Farid had often found Orpheus practising facial expressions in front of his mirror.

Oss closed the door, and Resa sat down hesitantly, as if not sure whether she really wanted to stay.

'I hope you didn't come alone!' Orpheus sat down at his desk and observed his guest like a spider studying a fly. 'Ombra isn't the safest place by night, particularly not for a woman.'

'I have to speak to you.' Resa still kept her voice very low. 'Alone,' she added, with a sideways glance at Farid.

'Farid!' said Orpheus, without looking at him. 'Get out. And take Jasper with you. He's spattered himself with ink again. Wash him.'

Farid bit back the curse that was on the tip of his tongue, put the glass man on his shoulder and went to the door. Resa lowered her head as he passed her, and he saw that her fingers were shaking as she smoothed out her plain skirt. What was she doing here?

As usual, Oss tried to trip him up outside the door, but Farid was used to such practical jokes now. He had even found a way to get his revenge for them. A smile from him, and the maids in the kitchen would see to it that the Chunk's next meal disagreed with him. Farid's smile was so much more attractive than Oss's.

All the same, he had to abandon any hope of listening at the door. Oss planted himself in front of it with a nasty smile. But Farid knew another place where the goings-on in Orpheus's study could be overheard. The maids said the wife of the previous owner of the house had liked to spy on her husband from this vantage point.

Jasper glanced at Farid in alarm when, instead of taking him down to the kitchen, he made for the stairs to the next floor. However, Oss suspected nothing, since Farid often had to fetch Orpheus a clean shirt or polish his boots. Orpheus's clothes had a room of their own, right beside his bedroom, and the spyhole was under the rails where his shirts hung. They smelt so strongly of roses and violets that Farid felt quite sick when he knelt down under them. One of the maids had shown him the hole in the floor when she had enticed him into the dressing room for a kiss. It was no bigger than a coin, but put your ear to it and you could hear every word spoken in the study downstairs, while if you looked through it with one eye you could see Orpheus's desk.

'Can I do it?' Orpheus was laughing as if he had never heard a more absurd question. 'There's no doubt about that! But my words have their price, and they don't come cheap.'

'I know.' Resa's voice still faltered as if she hated every word she spoke. 'I don't have silver like the Milksop, but I can work for you.'

'Work? Oh no, thank you very much, I'm not short of maidservants.'

'Do you want my wedding ring? It must be worth something. Gold is rare in Ombra.'

'No, keep it. I'm not short of gold and silver either. But there's something else ...' Orpheus gave a little laugh. Farid knew that laugh. It boded no good.

'It really is quite amazing how things sometimes turn out!' Orpheus went on. 'It certainly is. I might say you're the very

person I need.'

'I don't understand.'

'Of course not. Forgive me. I'll put it more clearly. Your husband – I don't know just what name to give him, he has such a vast number of them, but however that may be,' laughed Orpheus again as if he had made a joke that only he could appreciate, 'your husband met the White Women not so long ago, and I confess I had something to do with that. It's said he has felt their fingers on his heart already, but unfortunately he won't talk to me about this remarkable experience.'

'What does that have to do with my request?'

It struck Farid for the first time how like Meggie's voice her mother's was. The same pride, the same vulnerability carefully hidden behind it.

'Well, I'm sure you remember that scarcely two months ago, on Mount Adder, I swore to bring a mutual friend of ours back from the dead.'

Farid's heart began to beat so violently that he was afraid Orpheus might hear it.

'I'm still determined to keep my promise, but unfortunately I've discovered that it's as difficult to find out what game Death is playing in this world as in ours. No one knows anything, no one's saying anything, and the White Women themselves – no doubt rightly called the daughters of Death – won't appear to me, wherever I look for them. Obviously they don't talk to any reasonably healthy mortal, even one with such extraordinary abilities as mine! I'm sure you've heard about the unicorn, haven't you?'

'Oh yes. In fact, I saw it.' Did Orpheus hear the abhorrence in Resa's voice? If so, even that probably made him feel flattered.

Farid felt Jasper nervously digging his glass fingers into his shoulder. He'd almost forgotten the glass man. Jasper was scared to death of Orpheus, even more scared than he was of

his big brother. Farid put him down on the dusty floor and laid a warning finger on his lips.

‘It was immaculate,’ Orpheus went on in self-satisfied tones, ‘absolutely immaculate ... well, anyway, to return to the daughters of Death. It’s said that they don’t take it kindly when someone slips through their fingers. They follow such mortals into their dreams, wake them from sleep by whispering to them, even appear to them when they’re awake. Has Mortimer been sleeping badly since he escaped the White Women?’

‘What’s the point of all these questions?’ Resa sounded annoyed – and afraid.

‘Is he sleeping badly?’ Orpheus repeated. ‘Yes.’ Her reply was barely audible.

‘Good! Very good! What am I saying? Excellent!’ Orpheus’s voice was so loud that Farid involuntarily took his ear away from the hole in the floor. He hastily pressed it in place again. ‘In that case, then perhaps what I heard only recently about those pale ladies is true – and we come to the matter of my fee!’

Orpheus sounded very excited, but this time it didn’t seem to have anything to do with the prospect of silver.

‘There’s a rumour – and rumours, as I am sure you know, often contain a kernel of truth in both this and any other world,’ said Orpheus, speaking in a velvety voice, as if to make it easy for Resa to swallow every word, ‘there’s a rumour that those whose hearts the White Women have touched,’ – here he inserted a little pause for effect – ‘can summon them at any time. No fire is needed, such as Dustfinger used, no fear of death, only a voice that’s familiar to them, a heartbeat known to their fingers ... and they’ll appear! I expect by now you can guess what payment I want? In return for the words I write you, I want your husband to call the White Women for me. So that I can ask them about Dustfinger.’

Farid held his breath. It was as if he had heard the Devil in person bargaining. He didn’t know what to think or feel.

Indignation, hope, fear, joy ... he felt them all at once. But in the end one idea blotted out all the others: Orpheus wants to bring him back! He really is trying to bring Dustfinger back!

Down in the study there was such deathly silence that finally Farid put his eye, rather than his ear, to the spyhole. But all he could see was the careful parting in Orpheus's pale fair hair. Jasper knelt beside him, looking anxious.

'The best place for him to try it is probably a graveyard.' Orpheus sounded as confident as if Resa had already agreed to the deal. 'If the White Women really do show themselves, they'll attract less attention there – and the strolling players could make up a very moving song about this latest Bluejay adventure.'

'You're abominable, just as abominable as Mo says!' Resa's voice was trembling.

'Ah, does he indeed? Well, I take that as a compliment. And do you know what? I think he'll be glad to summon them! As I was saying, a fine heroic song could be written about it all. A song praising his courage to the skies, celebrating the magic of his voice.'

'Call them yourself if you want to talk to them.'

'Sad to say, that's what I can't do. I thought I'd made that clear enough, so ...'

Farid heard the door slam. Resa was going! He picked up Jasper, made his way out through Orpheus's clothes, and ran downstairs. Oss was so surprised when he shot past that he even forgot to put out a leg to trip him. Resa was already in the hall. Brianna was just giving her her cloak.

'Please!' Farid barred Resa's way to the door, ignoring both Brianna's hostile glance and Jasper's cry of alarm as he almost slipped off the boy's shoulder. 'Please! Perhaps Silvertongue really can summon them. Just get him to call them up, and then Orpheus can ask them how to get Dustfinger back! You want him to come back too, don't you? He protected you from

Capricorn. He stole into the dungeons of the Castle of Night for you. His fire saved you all when Basta was lying in wait for you on Mount Adder!’

Basta ... on Mount Adder ... for a moment the recollection silenced Farid as if Death had laid hands on him again. But then he went on, faltering, although Resa’s face remained as cold as ice. ‘Please! I mean, it’s not like when Silvertongue was wounded ... and even then they couldn’t do him any harm! He is the Bluejay!’

Brianna was staring at Farid as if he had lost his mind. Like everyone else, she thought Dustfinger was gone for ever. Farid could have hit them all for thinking so!

‘It was wrong of me to come here.’ Resa tried to push him aside, but Farid thrust her hands away.

‘He only has to call them up!’ he shouted at her. ‘Ask him!’

But Resa pushed him out of her way again, so roughly this time that he stumbled against the wall and the glass man clung to his shirt. ‘If you tell Mo I was here,’ she said, ‘I’ll swear you were lying!’

She was already in the doorway when Orpheus’s voice halted her. No doubt he had been standing at the top of the stairs for some time, waiting to see what would come of the quarrel. Oss stood behind him with the stolid expression that he always wore when he didn’t understand what was going on.

‘Let her go. She very obviously doesn’t want to let anyone help her.’ Every word Orpheus spoke dripped contempt. ‘Your husband will die in this story. You know that, or you wouldn’t have come here. Maybe Fenoglio even wrote the right song about it himself before he ran out of words. “The Bluejay’s Death”, touching and very dramatic, heroic as befits such a character, but it certainly won’t end with *and they lived happily ever after*. Be that as it may – the Piper struck up the first verse of the real song today. And, clever as he is, he wove a noose out of maternal love to put around your high-minded robber’s neck.

Is there any deadlier rope? Your husband will certainly walk straight into the trap in the most heroic way imaginable; he's playing the part Fenoglio created for him so enthusiastically, and his death will be the subject of another very impressive song. But I hope that when his head's on a spike above the castle gates you'll remember I could have kept him alive.'

The voice in which Orpheus said this conjured up the picture he described so clearly that Farid thought he could see Silvertongue's blood trickling down the castle walls while Resa stood in the doorway with her head bent, as if Orpheus's words had broken her own neck.

For a moment Fenoglio's whole story seemed to hold its breath again.

Then Resa raised her head and looked at Orpheus.

'Curse you!' she said. 'I wish I could call up the White Women myself and get them to take you away, here and now.'

She went down the steps outside the door unsteadily, as if her knees were trembling, but she did not turn back again.

'Close the door, it's cold!' ordered Orpheus, and Brianna obeyed. But Orpheus himself remained standing there at the top of the stairs, staring at the closed door.

Farid looked uncertainly up at him. 'Do you really believe Silvertongue can summon the White Women?'

'Ah, so you were eavesdropping. Good.'

Good? What did that mean?

Orpheus stroked back his pale hair. 'I'm sure you know where Mortimer is hiding at the moment, don't you?'

'Of course not! No one—'

'Spare me the lies!' snapped Orpheus. 'Go to him. Tell him why his wife came to see me, and ask if he's prepared to pay the price I demand for my words. And if you want to see Dustfinger again, the answer you bring me back had better be yes. Understand?'

‘The Fire-Dancer’s dead!’ Nothing in Brianna’s voice showed that she was speaking of her father.

Orpheus gave a little laugh. ‘Well, so was Farid, my beauty, but the White Women were ready to do a deal. Why wouldn’t they do the same thing again? It just has to be made attractive to them, and I think I now know how. It’s like fishing. You only need the right bait.’

What kind of bait did he mean? What was more desirable to the White Women than the Fire-Dancer? Farid didn’t want to know the answer. All he wanted was to think that all might yet end well. That bringing Orpheus here had been right after all ...

‘What are you standing around for?’ Orpheus shouted down at him. ‘Get moving! And you,’ he added to Brianna, ‘bring me something to eat. I think it’s time for a new Bluejay song. And this time I, Orpheus, will write it!’

Farid heard him humming to himself as he returned to his study.





19

Soldiers' Hands

Does the walker choose the path or the path the walker?

Garth Nix,
Sabriel

Ombra seemed more than ever like a city of the dead as Resa went back to the stable where she had left her horse. In the silence among the buildings she kept hearing Orpheus saying the same words over and over again, as clearly as if he were walking behind her: *But I hope that when his head's on a spike above the castle gates you'll remember I could have kept him alive.* Her tears almost blinded her as she stumbled through the night. What was she to do? Oh, what was she to do? Go back? No. Never.

She stopped.

Where was she? Ombra was a labyrinth of stone, and the years when she had known her way around its narrow streets were long gone.

Her own footsteps echoed in her ears as she walked on. She was still wearing the boots she had on when Orpheus read Mo and her here. He had almost killed Mo once already. Had she forgotten that?

A hiss overhead made her jump. It was followed by a dull crackling, and above the castle the night turned as scarlet as if the sky had caught fire. Sootbird was entertaining the Milksop and his guests by feeding the flames with alchemical poisons and menace until they writhed, instead of dancing as they used to dance for Dustfinger.

Dustfinger. Yes, she wanted him to come back too, and her heart froze when she imagined him lying among the dead. But it froze even more when she thought of the White Women reaching their hands out to Mo for a second time. Yet wouldn't they come for him anyway, if he stayed in this world? *Your husband will die in this story ...*

What was she to do?

The sky above her turned sulphurous green; Sootbird's fire had many colours. The street down which she was walking, faster all the time, ended in a square she had never seen before. Dilapidated houses stood here. A dead cat lay in one doorway. At a loss, she went over to the well in the middle of the square – and spun around when she heard footsteps behind her. Three men moved out of the shadows among the buildings. Soldiers wearing the Adderhead's colours.

Now what, she wondered? She had a knife with her, but what use was that against three swords? One of the men had a crossbow too. She had seen only too often what bolts from such a weapon could do. You should have worn men's clothes, she told herself. Hasn't Roxane told you often enough that no

woman in Ombra goes out after dark, for fear of the Milksop's men?

'Well? I suppose your man's as dead as all the rest, right?'

The soldier facing her was not much taller than she was, but the other two towered more than a head above her.

Resa looked up at the houses, but who was going to come to her aid? Fenoglio lived on the other side of Ombra, and Orpheus – well, even if he could hear her from here, would he and his gigantic servant help her after she'd refused to do a deal with him? Try it, Resa. Scream! Perhaps Farid at least will come and help you. But her voice failed her, as it had when she'd lost it in this world for the first time ...

Only one window showed a light in the surrounding houses. An old woman put her head out, and hastily retreated when she saw the soldiers. Resa seemed to hear Mo saying, 'Have you forgotten what this world is made of?' So if it really consisted only of words, what would those words say about her? *But there was a woman there who was lost twice in the Inkworld, and the second time she never found her way back again.*

Two of the soldiers were now right behind her. One of them put his hands on her hips. Resa felt as if she had read about what was now happening already somewhere, sometime ... stop trembling, she told herself. Hit him, claw at his eyes! Hadn't Meggie told her how to defend herself if something like this ever happened?

The smallest of the three men came close to her, a dirty, expectant smile on his narrow lips. What did it feel like to get pleasure out of other people's fear?

'Leave me alone!' At least her voice was obeying her again. But no doubt such voices were often heard in Ombra by night.

'Why would we want to do that?' The soldier behind her smelt of Sootbird's fire. His hands reached out for her. The others laughed. Their laughter was almost the worst thing of

all. Through the sound of it, however, Resa thought she heard something else. Footsteps – light, quick footsteps. Farid?

‘Take your hands off me!’ This time she shouted it as loud as she could, but it wasn’t her voice that made the men spin round.

‘Let her go. At once.’

Meggie’s voice sounded so grown-up that at first Resa didn’t realize it was her daughter’s. She walked out from among the houses holding herself very upright, just as she had walked into the arena that was the scene of Capricorn’s festivities.

The soldier holding Resa dropped his hands like a boy caught doing something wrong, but when he saw no one but a girl step out of the darkness he made a grab for his victim again.

‘Another one?’ The smaller man turned and sized Meggie up. ‘All the better. See that, you two? What did I tell you about Ombra? It’s a place full of women, so it is!’

Stupid words, and they were his last. The knife thrown by the Black Prince hit him in the back. Like shadows coming to life, the Prince and Mo emerged from the night. The soldier holding Resa pushed her away and drew his sword. He shouted a warning to the other man, but Mo killed them both so quickly that Resa felt she hadn’t even had time to draw breath. Her knees gave way, and she had to lean against the nearest wall. Meggie ran to her, asking anxiously if she was injured. But Mo just looked at her.

‘Well? Is Fenoglio writing again?’ That was all he said.

He knew why she had ridden here. Of course.

‘No!’ she whispered. ‘No, and he won’t write anything either. Nor will Orpheus.’

The way he was looking at her! As if he didn’t know whether he could believe what she said. He’d never looked at her like that before. Then he turned without a word, and helped the Prince to haul the dead men away into a side street.

‘We’re going back through the dyers’ stream!’ Meggie whispered to her. ‘Mo and the Prince have killed the guards there.’

So many men dead, Resa. Just because you want to go home. There was blood all over the paving stones, and when Mo dragged away the soldier who had been holding her, the man’s eyes still seemed to stare at her. Was she sorry for him? No. But it sent a shiver down her spine to hear her daughter, too, speak so casually of killing. And what did Mo feel about it? Did he feel anything any more? She saw him wiping the blood off his sword with one of the dead men’s cloaks, and looking her way. Why couldn’t she read his thoughts in his eyes now, as she used to?

Because it was the Bluejay she saw there. And this time she had summoned him herself.

The walk to the dye works seemed endless. Sootbird’s fire was still lighting up the sky, and they twice had to hide from a troop of drunken soldiers, but finally the acrid smell of the dyers’ vats rose to their nostrils. Resa covered her mouth and nose with her sleeve when they came to the stream that carried the effluent away to the river through a grating in the city wall, and as she followed Mo into the stinking liquid she felt so sick that she could hardly take a deep enough breath to plunge down under the grating herself.

As the Black Prince helped her to the bank she saw one of the dead guards lying among the bushes. The blood on his chest looked like ink in the starless night, and Resa began crying. She couldn’t stop, not even when they finally reached the river and washed the stinking water out of their hair and clothes as best they could.

Two robbers were waiting with horses further along the bank, at the place where the river-nymphs swam and the women of Ombra dried their washing on the flat rocks by the waterside. Doria was there too, without his brother the Strong

Man. He put his shabby cloak around Meggie's shoulders when he saw how wet she was. Mo helped Resa into the saddle, but still said not a word. His silence made her shiver more than her wet clothes, and it was the Black Prince and not Mo who brought her a blanket. Had Mo told the Prince what she had gone to do in Ombra? No, surely not. How could he have explained without telling him what power words had in this world?

Meggie knew why she had ridden to Ombra too. Resa saw it in her eyes. They were watchful – as if her daughter were wondering uneasily what she would do next. Suppose Meggie learnt that she'd even asked Orpheus for help? Would she understand that the only reason had been Resa's fears for her father?

It was beginning to rain as they set off. The wind drove the icy raindrops into their faces, and above the castle the sky glowed dark red, as if Sootbird were sending a warning after them. Doria fell behind on the Prince's orders, to obliterate their tracks, and Mo rode ahead in silence. When he looked round once his glance was for Meggie, not her, and Resa was thankful for the rain on her face that kept anyone from seeing her tears.



20

A Sleepless Night

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may
be,

I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron
feeds.

I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Wendell Berry,
The Peace of Wild Things

‘I’m sorry.’ Resa meant it.

I’m sorry. Two words. She whispered them again and again, but Mo sensed what she was really thinking behind her words: she was a captive again. Capricorn’s fortress, his village in the mountains, the dungeons, the Castle of Night ... so many prisons. Now a book was keeping her prisoner, the same book that had imprisoned her once before. And when she’d tried to escape, he had brought her back.

‘I’m sorry too,’ he said. He said it as often as she did – and knew that she was waiting to hear very different words. *Very well, let’s go back, Resa. We’ll find a way somehow!* But he didn’t say it, and the unspoken words gave rise to a silence they had never known, even when Resa was mute.

At last they lay down to sleep, although the sky was growing lighter outside, exhausted by the fear they had both felt and by what they *didn’t* say to each other. Resa fell asleep quickly, and as he looked at her sleeping face he remembered all the years when he had longed to see her asleep beside him. But even that idea brought him no peace – and at last he left Resa alone with her dreams.

He stepped out into the waning night, passed the guards, who ribbed him about the stench of the dye works that still clung to his clothes, and walked through the narrow ravine where they had set up camp, as though, if he only strained his ears hard enough, the Inkworld would whisper to him and tell him what to do.

He knew, only too well, what he *wanted* to do ...

Finally he sat down by one of the ponds that had once been a giant’s footprint, and watched the dragonflies whirring above the cloudy water. In this world they really did look like tiny winged dragons, and Mo loved sitting there, following their strange shapes with his eyes and imagining how huge the giant who had left such a footprint must have been. Only a few days ago he and Meggie had waded into one of the ponds to find out

how deep the footprints were. The memory made him smile, although he was not in any smiling mood. He could still feel the shuddering sensation that killing left behind it. Did the Black Prince feel it too, even after all these years?

Morning came hesitantly, like ink mingling with milk, and Mo couldn't say how long he had been sitting there, waiting for Fenoglio's world to tell him what ought to be done next, when a familiar voice quietly spoke his name.

'You shouldn't be here on your own,' said Meggie, sitting down beside him on the grass. It was white with frost. 'It's dangerous to be so far away from the guards.'

'What about you? I ought to be a stricter father, and forbid you to take a step outside the camp without me.'

She gave him an understanding smile and wrapped her arms around her knees. 'Nonsense. I always have a knife with me. Farid taught me how to use it.' She looked so grown-up. He was a fool, still wanting to protect her.

'Have you made it up with Resa?'

Her anxious expression made him feel awkward. Sometimes it had been so much easier to be alone with her.

'Yes, of course.' He put out a finger, and one of the dragonflies settled on it. It looked as if it were made of blue-green glass.

'And?' Meggie looked inquiringly at him. 'She asked them both, didn't she? Fenoglio and Orpheus.'

'Yes. But she says she didn't come to an agreement with either of them.' The dragonfly arched its slender body. It was covered with tiny scales.

'Of course not. What did she expect? Fenoglio isn't writing any more, and Orpheus is expensive.' Meggie frowned.

He stroked it with a smile. 'Watch out, or those lines will stay, and it's rather too early for that, don't you think?' How he

loved her face. He loved it so much. And he wanted it to look happy. There was nothing in the world he wanted more.

‘Tell me one thing, Meggie. Be honest with me – perfectly honest.’ She was a far better liar than he was. ‘Do you want to go back too?’

She bent her head and tucked her smooth hair back behind her ears.

‘Meggie?’

She still didn’t look at him.

‘I don’t know,’ she said at last, quietly. ‘Maybe. It’s a strain, feeling afraid so often. Afraid for you and Resa, afraid for Farid, for the Black Prince and Battista, for the Strong Man ...’ She raised her head and looked at him. ‘You know Fenoglio likes sad stories. Maybe that’s where all the unhappiness comes from. It’s just that sort of story ...’

That sort of story, yes. But who was telling it? Not Fenoglio. Mo looked at the frost on his fingers. Cold and white. Like the White Women ... sometimes he woke from sleep with a start because he thought he heard them whispering. Sometimes he still felt their cold fingers on his heart, and sometimes – yes – sometimes he almost wanted to see them again.

He looked up at the trees, away from all the whiteness below. The sun was breaking through the morning mist, and the last few leaves shone pale gold on branches that were now almost bare. ‘What about Farid? Isn’t he a reason to stay?’

Meggie lowered her head again. She was taking great care to sound casual. ‘Farid doesn’t mind whether I’m here or not. He thinks only of Dustfinger. It’s been even worse since he died.’

Poor Meggie. She’d fallen in love with the wrong boy. But when did love ever bother about that?

She tried very hard to hide her sadness when she looked at him again. ‘What do you think, Mo? Is Elinor missing us?’

‘You and your mother certainly. I’m not so sure about me.’ He imitated Elinor’s voice. *‘Mortimer! You’ve put that Dickens back in the wrong place. And why do I have to tell a bookbinder not to eat jam sandwiches in a library?’*

Meggie laughed. Well, that was something. It was getting harder every day to make her laugh. But next moment her face was grave again. ‘I do miss Elinor very much. I miss her house, and the library, and the café by the lake where she always took me for an ice cream. I miss your workshop, and you driving me to school in the morning and imitating Elinor and Darius quarrelling, and my friends always wanting to come and visit us because you make them laugh. I’d love to tell them everything that’s happened to us, not that they’d believe a word of it. Although – perhaps I could take a glass man back with me as proof.’

For a moment she seemed to be far, far away, taken back to her old world, not by the words of Fenoglio or Orpheus, but by her own. But they were still sitting beside a pond in the hills around Ombra, and a fairy fluttered into Meggie’s hair and pulled so hard that she shrieked, and Mo was quick to shoo the little creature away. It was one of the rainbow-coloured fairies, Orpheus’s creations, and Mo thought he detected something of her maker’s malice in the tiny face. Giggling happily, she carried her pale blonde plunder up to her nest, which shimmered in as many colours as the fairy herself. Unlike the blue fairies, those made by Orpheus didn’t seem to grow drowsy as winter came on. The Strong Man even claimed that they stole from the blue fairies too as they slept in their nests.

A tear hung on Meggie’s lashes. Perhaps the fairy had caused it, or perhaps not. Mo gently wiped it away.

‘I see. So you do want to go back.’

‘No! I tell you, I don’t know!’ She was looking at him so unhappily. ‘What will become of Fenoglio if we simply disappear? And what would the Black Prince think, and the

Strong Man, and Battista? What will become of them? And Minerva and her children, and Roxane ... and Farid?’

‘Yes, what?’ said Mo. ‘How would the story go on without the Bluejay? The Piper will take the children, because even the desperate mothers won’t be able to find the Bluejay for him. Of course the Black Prince will try to save them – he’ll be the true hero of this story, and he’ll play the part well. But he’s already played the hero too long, he’s tired – and he doesn’t have enough men. So the men-at-arms will kill him and all his followers one by one: the Prince, Battista, the Strong Man and Doria, Gecko and Snapper – well, perhaps those two will be no great loss. Then the Piper will probably chase the Milksop out and rule Ombra himself for a while. Orpheus will read unicorns here for him, or a few war machines ... yes, I’m sure the Piper would rather like those. Fenoglio will drown his sorrows in wine and drink himself to death. And the Adderhead will be immortal. Some day he’ll reign over a nation of the dead. I think the end of the story would go something like that, don’t you?’

Meggie looked at him. In the light of the new morning her hair looked like spun gold. Resa’s hair had been just the same colour when he had first seen her, in Elinor’s house.

‘Yes. Perhaps,’ said Meggie quietly. ‘But would the story really end so very differently if the Bluejay stayed? How could he give it a happy ending all by himself?’

‘Bluejay?’ A couple of toads jumped into the water in alarm as the Strong Man ploughed his way through the undergrowth.

Mo straightened up. ‘Maybe you’d better not call that name quite so loud in the forest,’ he said, lowering his own voice.

The Strong Man looked as horrified as if men-at-arms were already standing among the trees. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered. ‘My head doesn’t work well so early in the morning, and all that wine last night ... it’s the boy. You know, the one who works for Orpheus, the one that Meggie—’ He stopped short at the

sight of Meggie's expression. 'Oh, whatever I say sounds stupid!' he groaned, pressing his hand to his round face. 'Plain stupid! But that's how the words come out of my mouth. I can't help it!'

'Farid. His name is Farid. Where is he?' Meggie's face lit up, although she was making a great effort to look indifferent.

'Farid, of course. Funny sort of name. Like something out of a song, eh? He's in the camp. But he wants to speak to your father.'

Meggie's smile was extinguished as quickly as it had come to her lips. Mo put his arm around her shoulder, but a father's hug was no use to a lovesick girl. Damn the boy.

'He's all worked up. He must have ridden here so fast his donkey can hardly stand. He woke the whole camp, asking: "Where's the Bluejay? I have to speak to him!" No one could get anything else out of him!'

'The Bluejay!' Mo had never heard Meggie sound so bitter before. 'I've told him a thousand times already not to call you that. How can he be so stupid?'

The wrong boy. But what did the heart care about that?

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21

Sharp Words

Oh, please! he felt his heart say to him. Oh, please, let me *leave*!

John Irving,
The Cider House Rules

‘Darius!’ Elinor couldn’t bear the sound of her own voice any more. It was horrible – grouchy, irritable, impatient. She hadn’t sounded like that in the old days, had she?

Darius almost dropped the books he was bringing in, and the dog raised his head from the rug she had bought to keep him from ruining her wonderful wooden floor with his slimy slobber. Quite apart from the fact that you were always slipping on it.

‘Where’s the Dickens we bought last week? For goodness’ sake, how long does it take you to put a book back in its proper

place? Am I paying you to sit in my armchair reading? That's what you do when I'm not here, admit it!'

Oh, Elinor. How she hated the words coming out of her mouth, and yet there was no keeping them back: bitter and venomous, spat out by her unhappy heart.

Darius bowed his head, as he always did when he was trying not to show her how hurt he was. 'It's where it belongs, Elinor,' he said in his gentle voice, which only infuriated her more than ever. She'd been able to have magnificent quarrels with Mortimer, and Meggie had been a real little fighter. But Darius! Even Resa, mute as she was, used to stand up to Elinor better.

Owl-faced coward. Why didn't he call her names? Why didn't he throw the books at her feet instead of clutching them so lovingly to his scrawny chest, as if he had to protect them from her?

'Where it belongs?' she repeated. 'Do you think I can't even read these days?'

How anxiously the stupid dog was looking at her. Then he let his massive head sink to the rug again with a grunt.

Darius put the stack of books he was carrying down on the nearest glass case, went up to the shelf where Dickens made himself at home, taking up a lot of space in between Defoe and Dumas (the man had written just too many books, that was his trouble), went straight to the volume she wanted and took it out. Without a word, he gave it to Elinor. Then he set about sorting the books he had brought into the library.

She felt so stupid, and Elinor hated to feel stupid. It was almost worse than feeling sad.

'It's dirty!'

Stop it, Elinor, she told herself. But she couldn't. The words simply came out of her mouth. 'When did you last dust the books? Do I have to do that for myself too?'

Darius kept his thin back turned to her. He took the words without flinching, like an undeserved beating.

‘What’s the matter? Has your stuttering tongue finally given up? Sometimes I wonder whether you have a tongue at all! Mortola ought to have taken you with her instead of Resa – even when she was mute, Resa was more talkative than you.’

Darius put the last book on the shelf, straightened another, and marched towards the door, holding himself very straight.

‘Darius! Come back!’

He didn’t even turn.

Damn. Elinor hurried after him, holding the Dickens which, she had to admit, really wasn’t so very dusty. To be perfectly honest, it wasn’t dusty in the least. Of course it’s not, Elinor! she told herself. As if you didn’t know how devotedly Darius removes the tiniest speck of dust from the books every Tuesday and Friday. Her cleaning lady always laughed at the fine brush he used for the purpose.

‘Darius! For heaven’s sake, don’t make such a big deal of it!’

No reply.

The dog overtook her on the stairs, and looked down at her from the top step with his tongue hanging out.

‘Darius!’

By that stupid dog’s slobber – where was he?

His room was right next to the one Mortimer had used as an office. The door was open, and so was his suitcase, lying on the bed. It was the case she had bought him for their first trip together. Buying books with Darius had always been a pleasure (and she had to admit that he’d kept her from making many silly mistakes).

‘What ...?’ How heavy her sharp tongue suddenly felt. ‘What the devil are you doing?’

Well, what did she think? Very obviously, he was packing the few clothes he possessed.

‘Darius!’

He put the drawing of Meggie that Resa had given him on to the bed, with the notebook Mortimer had bound for him, and the bookmark that Meggie had made him from a bluejay’s feathers.

‘The dressing gown,’ he said hesitantly, as he put the photograph of his parents in the case, the one that always stood by his bed. ‘Do you mind if I take it with me?’

‘Don’t ask such silly questions! Of course not! It was a present, for heaven’s sake. But where are you going?’

Cerberus trotted into the room and went to the bedside cupboard. Darius always kept a few biscuits in the drawer.

‘I don’t know yet ...’

He folded the dressing gown just as carefully as his other clothes (it was much too large for him, but how would she have known his size?), put the drawing, the notebook and the bookmark in the case and closed it. Of course, he couldn’t manage to close the catches. He was so clumsy sometimes!

‘Unpack that again! At once! This is silly.’

But Darius shook his head.

‘Heavens above, you can’t go as well and leave me all alone!’ Elinor herself was frightened by the despair in her voice.

‘You’re alone even when I’m here, Elinor,’ said Darius, in a strained voice. ‘You’re so unhappy! I can’t stand it any more!’

The stupid dog gave up snuffling around the bedside table and stood in front of her, looking sad. He’s right, said his watering doggy eyes.

As if she didn’t know! She couldn’t stand herself any more either. Had she been like this long ago? Before Meggie, Mortimer and Resa came to live with her? Maybe. But then

there'd only been the books around, and they weren't complaining. Although, to be honest, she'd never been as hard on the books as she was on Darius.

'All right, you go, then!' Her voice began shaking in the most ridiculous way. 'Leave me alone. You're right. Why would you want to watch me getting more insufferable every day, always waiting for some miracle to bring them back? Perhaps I ought to shoot myself or drown myself in the lake, instead of perishing slowly in this miserable way. Writers sometimes do that, and it sounds good in stories.'

Oh, the way he was looking at her with his long-sighted eyes! (She really ought to have bought him new glasses long ago. His present pair looked just too silly.) Then he opened the case again and stared at his possessions. He took out Meggie's bookmark and stroked the boldly-patterned blue feathers. Bluejay feathers. Meggie had glued them to a strip of pale yellow card. It looked very pretty.

Darius cleared his throat. He cleared it three times.

'Oh, very well!' he said at last, in a voice that he carefully kept level. 'You win, Elinor. I'll try it. Fetch me that sheet of paper. Or you probably *will* go and shoot yourself someday.'

What? What was he saying? Elinor's heart began to race, as if hurrying on ahead of her into the Inkworld to see the fairies, the glass men, and the people she loved so much more than she loved any book.

'You mean ...?'

Darius nodded, resigned, like a warrior who has fought too many battles. 'Yes,' he said. 'Yes, Elinor.'

'I'll get it!' Elinor turned on her heel. Everything that had made her heart so heavy these last few weeks, turning her limbs to an old woman's – it was all gone! Vanished without trace.

But Darius called her back. 'Elinor! We ought to take some of Meggie's notebooks too – and some practical things, like ... like

a lighter, for instance.'

'And a knife!' Elinor added. After all, Basta was where they were going, and she had sworn that when next she met him she'd have a knife in her own hand.

She almost fell down the stairs, she was in such a hurry to get back to the library. Cerberus bounded after her, panting with excitement. Did he guess, in some corner of his doggy heart, that they were following his old master to the place where he'd gone when he had disappeared?

He's going to try it! He's going to try it! Elinor couldn't think of anything else. She didn't think of Resa's lost voice, Cockerell's stiff leg or Flatnose's mutilated face. Everything's going to be all right, that was all she thought as, with trembling fingers, she took the words that Orpheus had written out of the glass case. This time there won't be any Capricorn to frighten Darius. This time he'll read beautifully. Oh, dear God, Elinor, you're going to see them again!





22

Taking the Bait

If Jim had been able to read he might now have noticed a remarkable circumstance ... but the fact was that Jim couldn't read.

Michael Ende,
Jim Knopf and the Wild 13

A dwarf about twice the size of a glass man. Definitely not furry like Tullio – no, the dwarf was to have skin as white as alabaster, a head too big for it, and bandy legs. At least the Milksop always knew just what he wanted, even if his orders had come noticeably less often since the Piper arrived in the city. Orpheus was just wondering whether to give the dwarf red hair or the white hair of an albino when Oss knocked, and at his master's grunt of 'Enter' put his head around the door.

Oss had revolting table manners, and was not much given to washing himself, but he never forgot to knock.

‘There’s another letter for you, my lord!’

Ah, how good it made him feel being called that! *My lord ...*

Oss came in, bowed his bald head (he sometimes overdid the servility) and handed Orpheus a sealed piece of paper. Paper? That was strange. The fine gentlemen usually sent their orders written on parchment, and the seal didn’t look familiar either. Well, never mind that. This would be the third order today; business was good. The Piper’s arrival had made no difference to that. This world could have been made for him! Hadn’t he always known it, ever since he first opened Fenoglio’s book with his sweaty schoolboy fingers? His accomplished lies didn’t get him jailed as a forger or con man here; they valued his talents at their true worth in this world – and all Ombra bowed to him when he crossed the marketplace in his fine clothes. Fabulous.

‘Who’s the letter from?’

Oss shrugged his ridiculously broad shoulders. ‘Dunno, my lord. Farid gave it to me.’

‘Farid?’ Orpheus sat up straight. ‘Why didn’t you say so at once?’ He quickly snatched the letter from Oss’s clumsy fingers.

Orpheus – of course he didn’t begin ‘Dear Orpheus’. Even in the salutation of a letter the Bluejay told no lies! – *Farid has told me what you want in return for the words my wife has asked you for. I agree.*

Orpheus read the words three times, four, five times, and yes, there it was in black and white.

I agree.

The bookbinder had taken the bait! Could it really be that easy?

Yes, why not? Heroes are fools. Hadn’t he always said so? The Bluejay had fallen into the trap, and all he had to do was

snap it shut. With a pen, some ink ... and his tongue.

‘Go away! I want to be alone!’ he snarled at Oss, who was standing there looking bored and throwing nuts at the two glass men. ‘And take Jasper with you!’ Orpheus liked talking to himself out loud when he was writing his ideas down, so the glass man had better be out of the room. Jasper sat on Farid’s shoulder far too often, and on no account must the boy learn what Orpheus was planning to write now. It was true that the stupid boy wanted Dustfinger back even more fervently than he did, but Orpheus wasn’t so sure that he would sacrifice his girlfriend’s father in return. No, by now Farid worshipped the Bluejay as much as everyone else here did.

Ironstone gave his brother a gleefully malicious glance as Oss picked Jasper up from the desk with fleshy fingers.

‘Parchment!’ Orpheus ordered, as soon as the door had closed behind the two of them, and Ironstone busily spread the best sheet they had on the desk.

Orpheus, however, went to the window and looked out at the hills from which, presumably, the Bluejay’s letter had come. Silvertongue, Bluejay ... fine names they’d given him, and yes, Mortimer was certainly very much braver and more noble than Orpheus himself was, but such a paragon couldn’t compete with him in cunning. The good are stupid.

You have his wife to thank for this, Orpheus, he told himself as he began pacing up and down (nothing helped him to think better). If his wife wasn’t so afraid of losing him, you might never have found the bait you need!

Oh, it would be fantastic! His greatest triumph! Unicorns, dwarves, rainbow-coloured fairies ... not bad at all, but as nothing compared to what he’d do now! He would bring the Fire-Dancer back from the dead. Orpheus. Had the name he had taken ever suited him better? But he would be wilier than the singer whose name he had stolen. He would indeed. He would

send another man into the realm of Death in the Fire-Dancer's place – and he'd make sure that he didn't come back.

'Do you hear me, Dustfinger, in the cold land where you are now?' whispered Orpheus, while Ironstone busily stirred the ink. 'I've caught the bait to buy your freedom, the most wonderful bait of all, decked out with the finest pale-blue feathers!'

He began humming, as he always did when he was pleased with himself, and picked up Mortimer's letter again. What else had the Bluejay written?

It will be as you require. By the Devil's cloven hoof, he was writing in the style of public proclamations, like the robbers of the old days. *I will try to call up the White Women, and in return you will write words to take my wife and daughter back to Elinor's house. But all you are to say about me is that I will follow them later.*

Well, well. What was this?

Surprised, Orpheus lowered the sheet of paper. Mortimer wanted to stay? Why? Because his noble and heroic heart wouldn't let him steal away now that the Piper had made his threat? Or did he just like playing the part of a robber too much?

'Well, never mind which, noble Bluejay,' said Orpheus softly (oh, how he liked the sound of his own voice!). 'It won't turn out the way you think it will. Because I have plans of my own for you!'

High-minded idiot! Hadn't Mortimer ever read any tale of robbers right through? No happy ending for Robin Hood, for Angelo Duca, for Dick Turpin and all the rest of them. Why would there be a happy ending for the Bluejay? No, he was going to play just *one* part: the bait on the hook, a tasty bait – and one condemned to certain death.

And I will write the last song about him! thought Orpheus as he strode up and down with a spring in his step, as if he already

felt the right words inside him all the way down to his toes. *Good people, hear the amazing tale of the Bluejay who brought the Fire-Dancer back from the dead but then, sad to say, lost his own life.* Heart-rending. Like Robin Hood's death at the hands of the treacherous nun, or Angelo Duca's end on the gallows beside his dead friend, with the hangman riding him to death on his shoulders. Yes, every hero needs a death like that. Even Fenoglio wouldn't write it in any other way.

Ah, but he hadn't finished reading the letter yet! What else did that most noble of robbers have to say? *Hang a piece of blue cloth in the window when you have written the words.* (How romantic! A real robber's idea. He really did seem to be turning more and more into the character made by Fenoglio in his image!) *I will meet you at the graveyard of the strolling players on the following night. Farid knows where it is. Come alone, bringing one servant at the most. I know you are on friendly terms with the new governor, and I will not show myself until I am certain that none of his men is with you. Mortimer.* (Well, well, so he actually still signed his old name. Who did he think he was fooling?)

Come alone? Oh yes, I'll come alone, thought Orpheus. And you won't be able to see the words I've sent on ahead of you!

He rolled up the letter and slid it under his desk.

'Everything ready, Ironstone? A dozen sharpened pens, ink stirred slowly while you take sixty-five breaths, a sheet of the best parchment?'

'A dozen pens. Sixty-five breaths. The very best parchment.'

'What about this list of words?' Orpheus looked at his bitten fingernails. He had recently taken to bathing them in rosewater every morning, but unfortunately that just made them tastier. 'Your useless brother left his footprints all over the words beginning with B.'

The list. The list of all the words used by Fenoglio in *Inkheart*, arranged in alphabetical order. He had only recently told Jasper to prepare it – his brother had terrible handwriting. But

unfortunately the glass man had only just reached the letter D, so Orpheus still had to look everything up in Fenoglio's book if he wanted to be sure that any words he used were in *Inkheart* too. It was a nuisance, but it had to be done, and so far his method had proved its merits.

'All ready!' Ironstone nodded eagerly.

Good! The words were already coming. Orpheus sensed them like a tingling of his scalp. As soon as he picked up the pen he could hardly dip it in the ink fast enough. Dustfinger ... the tears still came to his eyes when he remembered seeing him lying dead in the mine. Certainly one of the worst moments of his life.

And how the promise he'd given Roxane had come to haunt him, even if she had never believed a word of it! He had given it with the dead man at his feet, *'I'll find words as precious and intoxicating as the scent of a lily, words to beguile Death and open the cold fingers he has closed around Dustfinger's warm heart!'* He had been looking for those words ever since he arrived in this world – even if Farid and Fenoglio thought he did nothing but write unicorns and rainbow-coloured fairies into it. But after his first failed attempts he had accepted the bitter fact that beauty of sound alone was not enough in this case. Words like lilies would never bring Dustfinger back. Death demanded a more substantial price – a price paid in flesh and blood.

Incredible that he hadn't hit upon the idea of Mortimer before – the man who had made Death a laughing stock to the living when he had bound an empty book to make the Adderhead immortal!

So away with him! This world needed only one silver tongue, and it was his. Once he had fed Mortimer to Death, and Fenoglio's brain was wrecked by the drink, only he would go on telling this story, on and on – with a suitable part in it for Dustfinger and a not inconsiderable part for himself.

‘Yes, call up the White Women for me, Mortimer!’ whispered Orpheus as he filled the parchment with word after word in his elegant script. ‘You’ll never know what I’ve whispered into their pale ears first! *“Look what I’ve brought you! The Bluejay. Take him to your cold lord with greetings from Orpheus, and give me the fire-eater in exchange.”* Ah, Orpheus, Orpheus, they can say many things about you, but they can never call you stupid.’

He dipped his pen in the ink with a soft laugh – and spun round when the door opened behind him. Farid came in. Damn it, where was Oss? ‘What do you want?’ he snapped at the boy. ‘How often do I have to tell you to knock before coming in? Next time I’ll throw the inkwell at your stupid head. Bring me wine! The best we have.’

How the lad looked at him as he closed the door. He hates me, thought Orpheus.

He liked that idea. In his experience only the powerful were hated, and that was what he meant to be in this world.

Powerful.

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23

The Graveyard of the Strolling Players

He sits down on a hill and sings. They are songs of magic, strong enough to wake the dead to life. Softly, cautiously, his song rises, then it grows louder and more insistent, until the turf opens up and the cold earth cracks.

Tor Age Bringsværd,
The Wild Gods

The strolling players' graveyard lay above a deserted village. Carandrella. It had kept its name, although the inhabitants had left long ago. Why and where they went no one knew now – an epidemic, some said, while others spoke of famine, and others again of two warring clans who had slaughtered one

another and driven any survivors out. Whichever story was true, it wasn't in Fenoglio's book, and nor was this graveyard where the peasants had buried their dead among the Motley Folk, so that now they slept side by side for ever.

A narrow, stony path wound its way from the abandoned cottages up the furze-grown slope, and ended on a rocky headland. Standing there you could look far south over the tree-tops of the Wayless Wood towards Argenta, where the sea lay somewhere beyond the hills. The dead of Carandrella, they said in Lombrica, have the best view in the country.

A crumbling wall surrounded the graves. The gravestones were of the pale stone that was also used to build houses here. Stones for the living, stones for the dead. Names were incised on some of them, scratched clumsily as if whoever wrote them had learned the letters only to preserve the sound of a beloved name, rescuing it from the silence of death.

Meggie felt as if the stones were whispering those names to her as she walked past the graves – Farina, Rosa, Lucio, Renzo. Those stones that bore no names seemed like closed mouths, sad mouths that had forgotten how to speak. But perhaps the dead didn't mind what their names had once been?

Mo was still talking to Orpheus. The Strong Man was sizing up his bodyguard Oss as if wondering which of them had the broader chest.

Mo. Don't do it! *Please*.

Meggie looked at her mother, and abruptly turned her face away when Resa returned her glance. She was so angry with her. It was all because of Resa's tears, and because she had ridden off to see Orpheus, that Mo was here now.

The Black Prince had come with them as well as the Strong Man – and Doria, although his brother had told him to stay behind. Like Meggie, he was standing among the graves, looking around him at the things lying in front of the gravestones: faded flowers, a wooden toy, a shoe, a whistle. A

fresh flower lay on one grave. Doria picked it up. The flower was white, like the beings they were waiting for. When he saw Meggie looking at him he came over to her. He really wasn't at all like his brother. The Strong Man wore his brown hair short, but Doria's was wavy and shoulder-length. Sometimes Meggie felt as if he had come out of one of the old fairy-tale books that Mo gave her when she had just learnt to read. The pictures in the books had been yellow with age, but Meggie used to look at them for hours, firmly convinced that the fairies who featured in some of the tales had painted them with their tiny hands.

'Can you read the letters on the stones?' Doria was still holding the white flower as he stopped in front of her. Two fingers of his left hand were stiff. His father had broken them long ago in a drunken rage when Doria tried to protect his sister from him. At least, that was how the Strong Man told the story.

'Yes, of course.' Meggie looked her father's way again. Fenoglio had sent him a message, delivered by Battista. *You can't trust Orpheus, Mortimer!* All useless.

Don't do it, Mo. *Please!*

'I'm looking for a name.' Doria sounded shyer than usual. 'But I can't ... I can't read. It's my sister's name.'

'What was she called?'

If the Strong Man was right, Doria had been fifteen on the very day when the Milksop was going to hang him. Meggie thought he looked older. 'Ah, well,' the Strong Man had said. 'Could be he's older. My mother's not that good at counting. She can't even remember my birthday.'

'Her name was Susa.' Doria looked at the graves as if the name alone could conjure up his sister. 'My brother says she's supposed to be buried here, only he can't remember just where.'

They found the gravestone. It was overgrown with ivy, but the name was still clearly legible. Doria bent down and moved the ivy leaves aside. 'She had hair as bright as yours,' he said.

‘Lazaro says my mother turned her out because she wanted to go and live with the strolling players. He never forgave her for that.’

‘Lazaro?’

‘My brother. You call him the Strong Man.’ Doria traced the letters with his finger. They looked as if someone had scratched them into the stone with a knife. The first S was overgrown with moss.

Mo was still talking to Orpheus. Orpheus handed him a sheet of paper: the words he had written at Resa’s request. Was Mo going to read them this very night, if the White Women really did appear? Would they all be back in Elinor’s house before it was day? Meggie didn’t know whether the idea made her feel sad or relieved. She didn’t want to think about it, either. All she wanted was for Mo to get on his horse and ride away again, and for her mother’s tears never to have brought him here.

Farid was standing a little way off with Jink on his shoulder. At the sight of him, Meggie’s heart felt the same chill as when she looked at Resa. Farid had taken Orpheus’s demand to Mo knowing what danger it could mean for her father, knowing too that if the deal went through they might never see each other again. But all that meant nothing to Farid. He cared for only one person, and that was Dustfinger.

‘They say you come from far away, you and the Bluejay.’ Doria had drawn the knife from his belt and was scratching the moss away from his sister’s name. ‘Is it different there?’

What could she say to that? ‘Yes,’ she murmured at last. ‘Very different.’

‘Really? Farid says there are coaches that can drive without horses, and music that comes out of a tiny black box.’

Meggie couldn’t help smiling. ‘Yes, that’s right,’ she said quietly.

Doria placed the white flower on his sister's grave and stood up. 'Is it true that there are flying machines in that country too?' How curious he was! 'I once tried making myself wings. I even flew a little way with them, but not very far.'

'Yes, there are flying machines there as well,' replied Meggie distractedly. 'Resa can draw them for you.'

Mo folded the sheet of paper that Orpheus had given him. Her mother went over to him and began talking to him urgently. Why bother? He wouldn't listen to her. 'There's no other way, Meggie,' was all he had said, when she herself had begged him not to agree to the offer made by Orpheus. 'Your mother is right. It's time to go back. This is getting more dangerous every day.' And what could she say to that? The robbers had moved camp three times over the last few days because of the Piper's patrols, and they had heard that women were going to Ombra Castle all the time, claiming to have seen the Bluejay, in the hope of saving their children.

Oh, Mo.

'He'll come to no harm,' said Doria behind her. 'You wait and see, even the White Women love his voice.'

Nonsense. Nothing but poetic nonsense!

When Meggie went over to Mo her boots left traces in the hoarfrost as if a ghost had been walking over the graveyard. Mo's face was so serious. Was he afraid? Well, what do you think, Meggie? she asked herself. He wants to call the White Women. *They're made of nothing but longing, Meggie.*

Farid looked awkwardly away as she passed him.

'Please! You don't have to do it!' Resa's voice sounded far too loud among all the dead, and Mo gently laid his hand on her lips.

'I want to,' he said. 'And you mustn't be afraid. I know the White Women better than you think.' He tucked the folded

sheet of paper into her belt. 'There. Take good care of it. If for any reason I'm unable to read it, then Meggie will do it.'

If for any reason I'm unable to read it ... if they kill me with their cold white hands, the way they killed Dustfinger. Meggie opened her mouth – and shut it again when Mo looked at her. She knew that look. No arguing. Forget it, Meggie.

'Good. Very well, then. I've done my part of the bargain. I ... er, I don't think we should wait any longer!' Orpheus was visibly impatient. He was stepping from foot to foot, with an unctuous smile on his lips. 'They're said to like it when the moon is shining, before it disappears behind the clouds ...'

Mo just nodded and signalled to the Strong Man, who gently led Resa and Meggie away from the graves to an oak growing at the side of the graveyard. At a gesture from his brother, Doria joined them under the tree.

Orpheus too took a couple of steps back, as if it were too dangerous to stand beside Mo now.

Mo exchanged a glance with the Black Prince. What had he told him? That he was going to try calling the White Women only for Dustfinger's sake? Or did the Prince know about the words that act would buy the Bluejay? No, surely not.

Side by side, the two of them walked among the graves. The bear trotted after them. As for Orpheus, he and his bodyguard hurried over to the oak where Meggie and Resa were standing. Only Farid stayed put as if rooted to the spot, on his face both fear of the beings whom Mo was about to summon, and longing for the man they had taken away with them.

A light wind blew over the graveyard, cool as the breath of those they were waiting for, and Resa instinctively took a step forward, but the Strong Man drew her back.

'No,' he said quietly, and Resa stood still in the shade of the branches and stared, like Meggie, at the two men who had now stopped in the middle of the graveyard.

‘Show yourselves, daughters of Death!’

Mo’s voice sounded as calm as if he had called on them many times before. ‘You remember me, don’t you? You remember Capricorn’s fortress, you remember following me into the cave, and how faintly my heart beat against your white fingers. The Bluejay wants to ask you about a friend. Where are you?’

Resa put a hand to her heart. It must be beating as fast as Meggie’s.

The first White Woman appeared right beside the gravestone where Mo was standing. She had only to reach out her arm to touch him, and she did touch him, as gently as if she were greeting a friend.

The bear moaned and lowered his head. Then he retreated step by step, and did something he had never done before. He left his master’s side. But the Black Prince stood his ground next to Mo, although his dark face showed fear such as Meggie had never seen on it before.

Mo’s face, however, gave nothing away when the pale fingers caressed his arm. The second White Woman appeared to his right. She put her hand to his breast, to the place where his heart was beating. Resa cried out and took another step forward, but the Strong Man held her back again.

‘They won’t harm him. Watch!’ he whispered to her.

Another White Woman appeared, then a fourth, and a fifth. They surrounded Mo and the Black Prince until Meggie saw the two men only as shadows among those misty figures. They were so beautiful – and so terrible – and for a moment Meggie wished Fenoglio could see them too. She knew how proud he would have been of the sight, proud of the flightless angels he had created.

More and more kept coming. They seemed to form from the white vapour that Mo and the Prince exhaled into the air. Why were there so many? Meggie saw the same enchantment that

she felt on Resa's face too, even on Farid's, although he was so frightened of ghosts.

But then the whispering began, in voices that seemed as ethereal as the pale women themselves. It grew louder and louder, and enchantment turned to fear. Mo's outline blurred, as if he were dissolving in all the whiteness. Doria looked at his brother in alarm. Resa called Mo's name. The Strong Man tried to hold her back once more, but she tore herself away and began to run. Meggie ran after her, plunging into the mist of translucent bodies. Faces turned to her, as pale as the stones over which she stumbled. Where was her father?

She tried to push the white figures aside, but she only reached into a void again and again, until suddenly she touched the Black Prince. There he stood, his face ashen, his sword in his trembling hand, looking around him as if he had forgotten where he was. But the White Women were no longer whispering. They dissolved like smoke blowing in the wind. The night seemed darker when they were gone. So dark. And so terribly cold.

Resa called Mo's name again and again, and the Prince looked round desperately, his useless sword in his hand.

But Mo was not there.

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24

To Blame

Time, let me vanish. Then what we separate by our very own presence can come together.

**Audrey Niffenegger,
*The Time Traveller's Wife***

Resa waited among the graves until day began to dawn, but Mo did not come back.

She felt Roxane's pain now, except that she didn't even have a dead man to mourn. Mo was gone as if he had never existed. The story had swallowed him up, and she was to blame.

Meggie was crying. The Strong Man held her in his arms while tears ran down his own broad face.

'It's your fault!' Meggie had kept shouting, pushing Resa and Farid away, not even letting the Prince comfort her. 'You two

persuaded him! Why did I save him after Mortola shot him, if they were going to take him now?’

‘I’m so sorry. I really am so very sorry.’

Orpheus’s voice still clung to Resa’s skin like something venomously sweet. When the White Women disappeared, he had stood there as if waiting for something, making an effort to hide the smile that kept returning to his lips. But Resa had seen it. Indeed she had ... and so had Farid.

‘What have you done?’ He had seized Orpheus by his fine clothes and hammered at the man’s chest with his fists. Orpheus’s bodyguard tried to grab Farid, but the Strong Man held him off.

‘You filthy liar!’ Farid had cried, sobbing. ‘You double-tongued snake! Why didn’t you ask them anything? You were never going to ask them anything, were you? You just wanted them to take Silvertongue! Ask him! Ask him what else he wrote! He didn’t just write the words he promised Silvertongue – there was a second sheet too! He thinks I don’t know what he gets up to because I can’t read – but I can count. There were *two* sheets – and his glass man says he was reading out loud last night.’

He’s right, a voice whispered inside Resa. Oh God, Farid is right!

Orpheus, however, had taken great pains to look genuinely indignant. ‘What’s all this stupid talk?’ he had cried. ‘Do you think I’m not disappointed myself? How can I help it if they took him away with them? I’ve fulfilled my part of the bargain! I wrote exactly what Mortimer asked for! But did I get a chance to ask them about Dustfinger? No! All the same, I won’t ask for my words back. I hope it’s clear to all of you here,’ and he looked at the Black Prince, who still had his sword in his hand, ‘that *I’m* the one who gets nothing out of this deal!’

The words he had written were still tucked into Resa’s belt. She had been going to throw them after him when he rode

away, but then she had kept them after all. The words that were to take them back ... she hadn't even looked to see what they said. They had been bought at too high a price. Mo was gone, and Meggie would never forgive her. She had lost them both, again, for the sake of those words.

Resa leant her forehead against the gravestone beside her. It was a child's grave; a tiny shirt lay on it. *I'm so sorry.* Once again she remembered Orpheus's deep, soft voice mingled with her daughter's sobbing. Farid was right. Orpheus was a liar. He had written what was to happen, and his voice made it come true. He had got rid of Mo because he was jealous of him, as Meggie had always said – and she had helped him to do it.

With trembling fingers she unfolded the paper that Mo had tucked into her belt. It was damp with dew, and Orpheus's coat of arms stood above the words, lavish as a prince's. Farid had told them how he had commissioned it from a designer of crests in Ombra – a crown for the lie that he came from a royal family, a pair of palm trees for the foreign land he claimed to come from, and a unicorn, its winding horn black with ink.

Mo's own bookbinder's mark was a unicorn too. Resa felt tears coming again. The words blurred before her eyes as she began to read them. The description of Elinor's house was a little stilted. But Orpheus had found the right words for her homesickness and her fear that this story could make her husband into someone else ... how did he know so well what went on in her heart? From you yourself, Resa, she thought bitterly. You took all your despair to him. She read on – and stopped short.

And mother and daughter went away, back to the house full of books, but the Bluejay stayed – promising to follow them when the time came and he had played his part ...

I wrote exactly what Mortimer asked for! she heard Orpheus saying, his voice full of injured innocence.

No. It couldn't be true! Mo had wanted to go with her and Meggie ... hadn't he?

You'll never know the answer, she told herself, bent double over the little grave from the pain in her heart. She thought she heard the child inside her weeping too.

'Let's go, Resa!' The Black Prince was there beside her, offering her his hand. His face showed no reproach, although it was sad, very sad. Nor did he ask about the words that Orpheus had written. Perhaps he believed the Bluejay had really been an enchanter after all. The Black Prince and the Bluejay, the two hands of justice – one black, the other white. Now there was only the Prince again.

Resa took his hand and rose to her feet with difficulty. Go? Go where? she felt like asking. Back to the camp, where an empty tent is waiting and your men will look at me with more hostility than ever?

Doria brought her horse. The Strong Man was still standing with Meggie, his big face as tearstained as her daughter's. He avoided her eyes. So he too blamed her for what had happened.

Go where? Back?

Resa was still holding the sheet of paper with Orpheus's words on it. Elinor's house. How would it feel to go back there without Mo? If Meggie would agree to read the words at all. *Elinor, I've lost Mo. I wanted to protect him, but ...* no, she didn't want to have to tell that story. There was no going back. There was nothing any more.

'Come along, Meggie.' The Black Prince beckoned Meggie over. He was about to put her up with Resa on her horse, but Meggie recoiled.

'No. I'll ride with Doria,' she said.

Doria brought his horse to her side. Farid gave the other boy a scowl when he lifted Meggie up behind him.

‘And why are you still here?’ Meggie snapped at him. ‘Still hoping to see Dustfinger suddenly materialize in front of you? He won’t come back, any more than my father will – but I’m sure Orpheus will take you in again, after all you’ve done for him!’

Farid flinched like a beaten dog at every word. Then he turned in silence and went to his donkey. He called for the marten, but Jink didn’t come, and Farid rode away without him.

Meggie didn’t watch him go.

She turned to Resa. ‘You needn’t think I’m going back with you!’ she said sharply. ‘If you need a reader for your precious words, go to Orpheus, like you did before!’

Again, the Black Prince didn’t ask what Meggie was talking about, although Resa saw the question on his weary face. He stayed at Resa’s side as they rode the long way back. The sun claimed hill after hill for its own, but Resa knew that night would not end for her. It would live in her heart from now on. The same night, for ever and ever. Black and white at the same time, like the women who had taken Mo away with them.

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25

The End and the Beginning

HERE IS A SMALL FACT. You are going to die.

**Markus Zusak,
*The Book Thief***

They brought it all back: the memory of pain and fear, of the burning fever and their cold hands on his heart. But this time everything was different. The White Women touched Mo and he did not fear them. They whispered the name that they thought was his, and it sounded like a welcome. Yes, they were welcoming him in their soft voices, heavy with longing, the voices he heard so often in his dreams – as if he were a friend who had been away for a long time, but had come back to them at last.

There were many of them, so many. Their pale faces surrounded him like mist, and everything else disappeared

beyond it: Orpheus, Resa, Meggie, the Black Prince, who had been standing beside him only a moment ago. Even the stars vanished, and so did the ground beneath his feet. Suddenly he was standing on rotting leaves. Their fragrance hung sweet and heavy in the cold air. Bones lay among the leaves, pale and polished. Skulls. Arm bones and leg bones. Where was he?

They've taken you away with them, Mortimer, he thought. Just as they took Dustfinger.

Why didn't the idea make him afraid?

He heard birds above him, many birds, and when the White Women withdrew he saw air-roots overhead, hanging from a dark height like cobwebs. He was inside a tree as hollow as an organ pipe and as tall as the castle towers of Ombra. Fungi grew from its wooden sides, casting a pale green light on the nests of birds and fairies. Mo put out his hand to the roots to see if his fingers still had any feeling in them. Yes, they did. He ran them over his face, felt his own skin, the same as ever, warm. What did that mean? Wasn't this death, after all?

If not, what was it? A dream?

He turned, still as if he were asleep, and saw beds of moss. Moss-women slept on them, their wrinkled faces as ageless in death as in life. But on the last mossy bed lay a familiar figure, his face as still as when Mo had last seen it. Dustfinger.

Roxane had kept the promise she made in the old mine. *And he will look as if he were only sleeping long after my hair is white, for I know from Nettle how you go about preserving the body even when the soul is long gone.*

Hesitantly, Mo approached the motionless figure. Without a word, the White Women made way for him.

Where are you, Mortimer, he wondered? Is this still the world of the living, even though the dead sleep here?

Dustfinger did indeed look as if he were sleeping. A peaceful, dreamless sleep. Was this where Roxane visited him?

Presumably it was. But how did he himself come to be here?

‘Because this is the friend you wanted to ask about, isn’t he?’ The voice came from above, and when Mo looked up into the darkness he saw a bird sitting among the web of roots, a bird with gold plumage and a red mark on its breast. It was staring down at him from a bird’s round eyes, but the voice that came from its beak was the voice of a woman.

‘Your friend is a welcome guest here. He has brought us fire, the only element that does not obey me. And my daughters would gladly bring you here too, because they love your voice, but they know that voice needs the breath of living flesh. And when I ordered them to bring you here all the same, as your penalty for binding the White Book, they persuaded me to spare you, telling me you have a plan which will appease me.’

‘And what might that be?’ It was strange to hear his own voice in this place.

‘Don’t you know? Even though you’re ready to part with everything you love for it? You are going to bring me the man you took from me. Bring me the Adderhead, Bluejay.’

‘Who are you?’ Mo looked at the White Women. Then he looked at Dustfinger’s still face.

‘Guess.’ The bird ruffled up its golden feathers, and Mo saw that the mark on its breast was blood.

‘You are Death.’ Mo felt the word heavy on his tongue. Could any word be heavier?

‘Yes, so they call me, although I might be called by so many other names!’ The bird shook itself, and golden feathers covered the leaves at Mo’s feet. They fell on his hair and shoulders, and when he looked up again there was only the skeleton of a bird sitting among the roots. ‘I am the end and the beginning.’ Fur sprouted from the bones. Pointed ears grew on the bare skull. A squirrel was looking down at Mo, clutching the roots with tiny paws, and the voice with which the bird had spoken now came from its little mouth.

‘The Great Shape-Changer, that’s the name I like!’ The squirrel shook itself in its own turn, lost its fur, tail and ears and became a butterfly, a caterpillar at his feet, a big cat with a coat as dappled as the light in the Wayless Wood – and finally a marten that jumped on to the bed of moss where Dustfinger lay, and curled up at the dead man’s feet.

‘I am the beginning of all stories, and their end,’ it said in the voice of the bird, in the voice of the squirrel. ‘I am transience and renewal. Without me nothing is born, because without me nothing dies. But you have interfered with my work, Bluejay, by binding the Book that ties my hands. I was very angry with you for that, terribly angry.’

The marten bared its teeth, and Mo felt the White Women coming close to him again. Was he about to die now? His chest felt tight, he was breathing with difficulty, as he had when he felt them near him before.

‘Yes, I was angry,’ whispered the marten, and its voice was the voice of a woman, but it suddenly sounded old. ‘However, my daughters calmed my rage. They love your heart as much as your voice. They say it is a great heart, very great, and it would be a pity to break it now.’

The marten fell silent, and suddenly the whispering that Mo had never forgotten came again. It surrounded him; it was everywhere. ‘Be on your guard! Be on your guard, Bluejay!’

Be on his guard against what? The pale faces were looking at him. They were beautiful, but they blurred as soon as he tried to see them more distinctly.

‘Orpheus!’ whispered the pale lips.

And suddenly Mo heard Orpheus’s voice. Its melodious sound filled the hollow tree like a cloyingly sweet fragrance. ‘*Hear me, Master of the Cold,*’ said the poet. ‘*Hear me, Master of Silence. I offer you a bargain. I send you the Bluejay, who has made mock of you. He will believe that he has only to call on your pale daughters, but I am offering him to you as the price for the Fire-Dancer. Take*

him, and in return send Dustfinger back to the land of the living, for his tale is not yet told to its end. But the Bluejay's story lacks only one chapter, and your White Women shall write it.' So the poet wrote and so he read, and as always his words came true. The Bluejay, presumptuous as he was, summoned the White Women, and Death did not let him go again. But the Fire-Dancer came back, and his story had a new beginning.

Be on your guard ...

It was a few moments before Mo really understood. Then he cursed his stupidity in trusting the man who had nearly killed him once already. He desperately tried to remember the words Orpheus had written for Resa. Suppose he was trying to make an end of Meggie and Resa as well? Remember, Mo! What else did he write?

'Yes, you were indeed stupid,' Death's voice mocked him. 'But he was even more stupid than you. He thinks I can be bound with words, I who rule the land where there are no words, although all words come from it. Nothing can bind me, only the White Book, because you have filled its pages with white silence. Almost daily, the man it protects sends me a poor wretch he has killed as a messenger of his mockery. I would happily melt the flesh from your bones for that! But my daughters read your heart like a book, and they assure me that you will not rest until the man whom the Book protects is mine again. Is that true, Bluejay?'

The marten lay down on Dustfinger's unmoving breast.

'Yes!' whispered Mo.

'Good. Then go back and rid the world of that Book. Fill it with words before spring comes, or winter will never end for you. And I will take not only your life for the Adderhead's, but your daughter's too, because she helped you to bind the Book. Do you understand, Bluejay?'

'Why two?' asked Mo hoarsely. 'How can you ask for two lives in return for one? Take mine, that's enough.'

But the marten only stared at him. 'I fix the price,' it said. 'All you have to do is pay it.'

Meggie. No. No. Go back, Resa, Mo thought. Get Meggie to read what Orpheus wrote and go back! Anything is better than this. Go back! Quickly!

But the marten laughed. And once again it sounded like an old woman's laughter.

'All stories end with me, Bluejay,' Death said. 'You will find me everywhere.' And as if to prove it, the marten turned into the one-eared cat that liked to steal into Elinor's garden to hunt her birds. The cat jumped nimbly off Dustfinger's breast and rubbed around Mo's legs. 'Well, what do you say, Bluejay? Do you accept my conditions?'

And I will take not only your life for the Adderhead's but your daughter's too.

Mo glanced at Dustfinger. His face looked so much more peaceful in death than it had in life. Had he met his younger daughter on the other side, and Cosimo, and Roxane's first husband? Were all the dead in the same place?

The cat sat down in front of him and stared at him.

'I accept,' said Mo, so hoarsely that he could hardly make out his own words. 'But I make a condition too: give me the Fire-Dancer to go with me. My voice stole ten years of his life. Let me give them back to him. And there's another thing ... don't the songs say that the Adderhead's death will come out of the fire?'

The cat crouched down. Fur fell red on the rotting leaves. Bones covered themselves with flesh and feathers again, and the gold-mocker with its bloodstained breast fluttered up to settle on Mo's shoulder.

'You like to make what the songs say come true, do you?' the bird whispered to him. 'Very well, I will give him to you. Let the Fire-Dancer live again. But if spring comes and the

Adderhead is still immortal, his heart will stop beating at the same time as yours – and your daughter's.'

Mo felt dizzy. He wanted to seize the bird and wring its golden neck to silence that voice, so old and pitiless, with irony in every word. Meggie. He almost stumbled as he went to Dustfinger's side once more.

This time the White Women were reluctant to make way for him.

'As you see, my daughters don't like to let him go,' said the old woman's voice. 'Even though they know he will come back.'

Mo looked at the motionless body. The face was indeed so much more tranquil than it had been in life, and all of a sudden he wasn't sure whether he was really doing Dustfinger a favour by calling him back.

The bird was still on his shoulder, so light in weight, so sharp of claw.

'What are you waiting for?' asked Death. 'Call him!'

And Mo obeyed.





26

A Familiar Voice

What remains to him? Tall Time wonders. What thoughts and smells, what names? Or are there only sensations and a clutter of incompatible words?

Barbara Gowdy,
The White Bone

They had gone. Had left him alone with all the blue that clashed with the red of the fire. Blue as the evening sky, blue as cranesbill flowers, blue as the lips of drowned men and the heart of a blaze burning with too hot a flame. Yes, sometimes it was hot in this world too. Hot and cold, light and dark, terrible and beautiful, it was everything all at once. It wasn't true that you felt nothing in the land of Death. You felt and heard and smelt and saw, but your heart remained

strangely calm, as if it were resting before the dance began again.

Peace. Was that the word?

Did the guardians of this world feel it too, or did they long for something else? The pain they didn't know, the flesh they didn't dwell in. Perhaps. Or perhaps not. He couldn't tell from their faces. He saw both there: peace and longing, joy and pain. As if they knew about everything in this world and the other, just as they themselves were made of every colour at once, all the colours of the rainbow merging into white light. They told him that the land of Death had other places too, darker than the one where they had brought him and where no one stayed for long – except for him. Because he called up fire for them.

The White Women both feared and loved fire. They warmed their pale hands at it, laughing like children when he made it dance for them. They *were* children, young and old at the same time, so old. They made him form trees and flowers of fire, a fiery sun and moon, but for himself he made the fire paint faces, the faces he saw when the White Women took him with them to the river where they washed the hearts of the dead. Look into it, they whispered to him. Look into it, then those who love you will see you in their dreams. And he leant over the clear blue water and looked at the boy and the woman and the girl whose names he had forgotten, and saw them smiling in their sleep.

Why don't I know their names any more? he asked.

Because we've washed your heart, they said. Because we've washed it in the blue water that parts this world from the other one. It makes you forget.

Yes. He supposed it did. For whenever he tried to remember he saw nothing but the blue, cool and caressing. It was only when he called up fire and its red glow spread that the pictures came again, the same pictures that he saw in the water. But his longing for them fell asleep before it had woken fully.

What was my name? he sometimes asked, and then they laughed. Fire-Dancer, they whispered, that was your name and always will be, because you'll stay with us for all eternity and never go away like all the others, away to another life ...

Sometimes they brought him a girl, a little girl. She stroked his face and smiled like the woman he saw in the water and the flames. Who's that? he asked. She's been here and went away again, they said she was your daughter.

Daughter ... the word sounded like pain, but his heart merely remembered and did not feel it. It felt only love, nothing but love. There was nothing else any more.

Where were they? They had never before left him alone, not once since he had come here ... wherever here was.

He had grown so used to the pale faces, to their beauty and their soft voices.

But suddenly he heard another voice, very different from theirs. He knew it. And he knew the name it was calling.

Dustfinger.

He hated that voice ... or did he love it? He didn't know. He knew only one thing: it brought back everything he had forgotten – like a violent pain suddenly jolting his still heart into beating again. Hadn't that voice caused him pain once before, so much pain that it almost broke his heart? Yes, he remembered! He pressed his hands to his ears, but in the world of the dead you don't hear with your ears alone, and the voice made its way right inside him like fresh blood flowing into veins that had frozen long ago.

'Wake up, Dustfinger!' it said. 'Come back. The story isn't over yet.'

The story ... he felt the blue pushing him away, he felt firm flesh surrounding him again, and a heart beating in a chest far too small for it.

Silvertongue, he thought. It's Silvertongue's voice. And suddenly all the names came back to him: Roxane, Brianna, Farid ... and the pain was back again, and time, and longing too.



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27

Lost and Back Again

For it so happens that I have never been able to convince myself that the dead are utterly dead.

**Saul Bellow,
*Henderson the Rain King***

It was dark when Gwin woke Roxane. She still didn't like the marten, but she couldn't bring herself to chase him away. She had seen him sitting on Dustfinger's shoulder too often. Sometimes she thought she still felt the warmth of his hands on Gwin's brown coat. Since his master's death the marten had allowed Roxane to stroke him. He never used to let her do that before. But he also used to kill her chickens before, and now he spared them, as if that were part of their unspoken agreement – his thanks for her letting him, and no other living creature, follow her when she went to his master. Only Gwin shared her

secret and kept her company when she sat beside the dead man for an hour, sometimes two, losing herself in the sight of his still face.

He's back! said Gwin's bristling coat as he jumped up on her breast, but Roxane didn't understand. She pushed the marten away when she saw how dark it still was outside, but he persisted, hissing at her and scratching at the door. Of course she thought at once of the patrols that the Milksop was only too likely to send to isolated farms at night. Heart thudding, she reached for the knife that lay under her pillow and threw on her dress, while the marten pawed more and more impatiently at the door. Luckily he hadn't yet woken Jehan. Her son was fast asleep. Her goose wasn't giving the alarm either ... which was strange.

Barefoot, she went to the door, knife in hand, and listened, but there was nothing to be heard outside, and when she cautiously went out into the open air she felt as if she heard the night itself breathing deeply and regularly, like someone asleep. The stars shone down on her like flowers made of light, and their beauty hurt her weary heart.

'Roxane ...'

The marten shot past her.

It couldn't be true. The dead did not come back, even when they had promised they would. But the figure emerging from the shadows near the stable was so very familiar.

Gwin hissed when he saw the other marten sitting on his master's shoulder.

'Roxane.' He spoke her name as if he wanted to savour it on his tongue, like something he hadn't tasted for a long time.

It was a dream, one of the dreams she had almost every night. Dreams in which she saw his face so clearly that she touched it in her sleep, and next day her fingers still remembered his skin. Even when he put his arms around her, carefully, as if he wasn't sure whether he had forgotten how to

hold her, she didn't move – because her hands did not believe they would really feel him, her arms did not believe they could hold him again. But her eyes could see him. Her ears heard him breathing. Her skin felt his, as warm as if the fire were inside him, after he had been so terribly cold.

He had kept his promise. And even if he was coming to her only in a dream it was better than nothing ... so much better.

'Roxane! Look at me. Look at me.' He took her face between his hands, caressed her cheek, wiped away the tears she so often felt on her skin when she woke. And only then did she draw him close to her, let her hands tell her that she wasn't just embracing a ghost. It couldn't be true. She wept as she pressed her face to his. She wanted to hit him for having left her for the boy's sake, for all the pain she had already felt on his account, so much pain, but her heart gave her away, as it had the first time he came back. It always gave her away.

'What is it?' He kissed her once more.

The scars. They were gone, as if the White Women had washed them away before sending him back to life.

She took his hands and laid them against his cheeks.

'Well, who'd have thought it!' he said, stroking his own skin with his fingers as if it were a stranger's. 'They've really gone! Basta wouldn't like that at all.'

Why had they let him go? Who had paid the price for him, as he had paid it for the boy?

Why did she ask? He was back. That was all that mattered, back from the place from which there was no return. Where all the others were. Her daughter, the father of her son, Cosimo ... so many dead. But he had come back. Even if she saw in his eyes that, this time, he had been so far away that something of him was still left there.

'How long will you stay this time?' she whispered.

He did not answer at once. Gwin rubbed his head against his neck and looked at him, as if he too wanted to know the answer.

‘As long as Death allows,’ he replied at last, and placed her hand on his beating heart.

‘What does that mean?’ she whispered. But he closed her mouth with a kiss.





28

A New Song

Bright hope arises from the dark
And makes the mighty tremble.
Princes can't fail to see his mark,
Nor can they now dissemble.
With hair like moleskin smooth and black,
And mask of bluejay feathers,
He vows wrongdoers to attack,
Strikes princes in all weathers.

Fenoglio,
The Bluejay Songs

‘The Bluejay’s come back from the dead!’ It was Doria who brought the Black Prince the news. The boy stumbled into his tent just before dawn, so breathless that he could

hardly get the words out. 'A moss-woman saw him. By the Hollow Trees where the healers bury their dead. She says he's brought the Fire-Dancer back too. Please! May I tell Meggie?'

Incredible words. Far too wonderful to be true. All the same, the Black Prince set off at once for the place where the Hollow Trees grew – after making Doria promise not to tell anyone else what he had told him: neither Meggie nor her mother, neither Snapper nor any of the other robbers, not even his own brother, who was lying outside by the fire, fast asleep.

'But they say the Piper's heard about it too!' the boy faltered.

'That's unfortunate,' replied the Prince. 'Let's hope I find him before the Piper does.'

He rode fast, so fast that the bear was soon snorting with disapproval as he trotted along beside him. Why such haste? For a foolish hope? Why did his heart always insist on believing that there was a light in all the darkness? Where did he keep getting new hope from, after he had been disappointed countless times? *You have the heart of a child, Prince.* Hadn't Dustfinger always told him so? *And he's brought the Fire-Dancer back too.* It couldn't be true. Such things happened only in songs, and in the stories that mothers told their children in the evening to drive away night-time fears.

Hope can make you careless, he should have known that too. The Black Prince didn't see the soldiers until they emerged ahead of him through the trees. A good number of them. He counted ten. They had a moss-woman with them, her thin neck already rubbed sore by the rope on which they were pulling her along. Presumably they had caught her to make her lead them to the Hollow Trees, for hardly anyone knew the place where the healers buried their dead. They themselves, so rumour said, made sure that all the paths to it were hidden by undergrowth. But after helping Roxane to take Dustfinger there, the Black Prince knew the way.

It was a sacred place, but in her fear the moss-woman had indeed led the men-at-arms the right way. The crowns of the dead trees could already be seen in the distance. They rose, as grey as if morning had stripped them bare, among the oaks, which were still autumnal gold, and the Prince prayed the Bluejay wasn't there. Better to be with the White Women than in the Piper's hands.

Three men-at-arms came up on him from behind, swords in their hands. The moss-woman sank to her knees as her captors drew their own swords and turned to their new quarry. The bear reared up on his hind legs and bared his teeth. The horses shied, and two of the soldiers retreated, but there were still a great many of them – too many for a knife and a pair of claws.

'Well, guess what! Obviously the Piper's not the only one stupid enough to believe moss-women's gossip!' Their leader was almost as pale as the White Women, and his face was sprinkled with freckles. 'The Black Prince, none other! There was I cursing my luck, sent riding into this damn forest to catch a ghost, and who should stumble into my path but his black brother! The price on your head isn't as high as the price for the Bluejay, but it'll make us all rich men!'

'You're wrong there. Touch him and you'll be dead men instead.'

And his voice wakens the dead from sleep and makes the wolf lie down with the lamb ... The Bluejay stepped out from behind a beech tree as naturally as if he had been waiting for the soldiers there. *Don't call me Bluejay – it's only a name from the songs!* He had said that to the Prince so often, but what else was he to call him?

Bluejay. They were whispering his name, their voices hoarse with terror. Who was he? The Prince had often wondered. Did he really come from the land where Dustfinger had spent so many years? And what kind of country was it? A land where songs came true?

Bluejay.

The bear roared him a welcome that made the horses rear, and the Jay drew his sword very slowly, as he always did, the sword that had once belonged to Firefox and had killed so many of the Black Prince's men. The face beneath the dark hair seemed paler than usual, but the Prince could see no fear in it. Presumably you forgot what fear was once you visited Death.

'Yes, as you see, I'm really back from the dead. Even if I still feel Death's claws in me.' He spoke dreamily, as if a part of him were still with the White Women. 'I'm willing to show you the way if you want. It's entirely up to you. But if you do prefer to live a little longer,' he added, flourishing his sword in the air as if he were writing their names, 'then let him go. Him and the bear.'

They just stared at him, and their hands, resting on their swords, trembled as if they were reaching out for their own deaths. Nothing is more terrifying than fearlessness, and the Black Prince went to the Bluejay's side and felt that the words were like a shield for them, the words sung quietly up and down the country ... all about the White Hand and the Black Hand of Justice.

There'll be a new song now, thought the Prince as he drew his sword, and his heart felt so foolishly young that he could have fought a thousand men. As for the Piper's soldiers, they wrenched their horses' heads round and fled – from just two men. And the words.

When they had gone the Bluejay went over to the moss-woman, who was still kneeling in the grass with her hands pressed to her bark-brown face, and undid the rope from her neck.

'A few months ago one of you tended a bad wound I had,' he said. 'It wasn't you, was it?'

The moss-woman let him help her up, but she looked at him suspiciously. 'What do you mean by that? That we all look the

same to human eyes?’ she snapped. ‘Well, we feel the same about you. So how am I supposed to know if I ever set eyes on you before?’

And she limped away without another look at her rescuer, who stood there watching her go as if he had forgotten where he was.

‘How long have I been away?’ he asked when the Black Prince joined him.

‘Over three days.’

‘As long as that?’ Yes, he had been far away, very far away. ‘Of course. Time runs differently when you meet Death, isn’t that what they say?’

‘You know more about it than I do now,’ replied the Prince.

The Bluejay made no comment on that.

‘Have you heard who I brought with me?’ he asked at last.

‘It’s difficult for me to believe such good news,’ said the Black Prince huskily, but the Bluejay smiled and ran a hand over the Prince’s short hair.

‘You can let it grow again,’ he said. ‘The man you shaved it for is breathing again. He’s left his scars with the dead, that’s all.’

It couldn’t be true.

‘Where is he?’ His heart still ached from the night when he had kept watch with Roxane at Dustfinger’s side.

‘No doubt with Roxane. I didn’t ask him where he was going. We were neither of us particularly talkative. The White Women leave silence behind them, Prince, not words.’

‘Silence?’ the Black Prince laughed, and embraced him. ‘What are you talking about? They’ve left joy behind, pure joy! And hope, hope again at last! I feel younger than I’ve felt for years! As if I could tear up trees by the roots – well, maybe not that beech, but many others. By this evening, everyone will be

singing that the Bluejay fears Death so little that he seeks it out, and the Piper will tear the silver nose off his face in a rage ...’

The Bluejay smiled again, but his look was still grave – very grave for a man who has just come back from the dead unscathed. And the Black Prince realized that there was bad news behind the good news, a shadow behind all the light. But they didn’t speak of that. Not yet.

‘What about my wife and my daughter?’ asked the Bluejay. ‘Have they ... have they already gone?’

‘Gone?’ The Black Prince looked at him in surprise. ‘No. Where would they go?’

Relief and worry were mingled equally in the other man’s face.

‘Sometime I’ll explain all that to you too,’ he said. ‘Sometime. But it’s a long story.’

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29

A Visitor to Orpheus's Cellar

So many lives,
So many things to remember!
I was a stone in Tibet

A tongue of bark
At the heart of Africa
Growing darker and darker ...

Derek Mahon,
Lives

When Oss, gripping Farid firmly by the back of his neck, told him that Orpheus wanted to see him in his study at once, he took two bottles of wine with him. Cheeseface had been drinking like a fish ever since their return from the

graveyard of the strolling players, but the wine didn't make Orpheus talkative like Fenoglio, just extremely malicious and unpredictable.

As so often, he was by the window when Farid entered the study. He was swaying slightly, and staring at the sheet of paper that he'd studied over and over again these last few days, cursing, crumpling it up and then smoothing it out again.

'There it is in black and white, every letter perfect as a picture, and it sounds good too, it sounds damn good!' he said thickly as his finger kept tapping the words. 'So why, by all the infernal spirits, did the bookbinder come back again too?'

What was Cheeseface talking about? Farid put the wine bottles on the table and stood there waiting. 'Oss says you want to speak to me?' he asked.

Jasper was sitting beside the jug of pens, making frantic signals, but Farid couldn't work out what they meant.

'Ah yes, Dustfinger's angel of death.' Orpheus put the paper down on his desk and turned to him with a nasty smile.

Why on earth did you come back to him? Farid asked himself, but he had only to think of the hatred on Meggie's face in the graveyard to answer his own question. Because you didn't know where else to go.

'Yes, I sent for you.' Orpheus looked at the door. Oss had followed Farid into the room, more silently than you would have thought possible for a man of his size, and before Farid had time to realize why Jasper was waving to him so frantically, Oss's meaty hands had seized him.

'So you haven't heard the news yet!' said Orpheus. 'Of course not. If you had I'm sure you'd have gone chasing straight off to him.'

Off to who? Farid tried to wriggle free, but Oss pulled his hair so hard that tears of pain came to his eyes.

‘He really doesn’t know. How touching.’ Orpheus came so close to him that the smell of the wine on his breath made Farid feel sick.

‘Dustfinger,’ said Orpheus in his velvety voice. ‘Dustfinger is back.’

Farid immediately forgot all about Oss’s rough fingers and Orpheus’s unpleasant smile. There was nothing in him but joy, like a violent pain, too much for his heart to bear.

‘Yes, he’s back,’ Orpheus went on. ‘Thanks to my words – but the rabble out there are saying the Bluejay brought him back!’ he added, with a dismissive gesture to the window. ‘Curse them. May the Piper make maggot-flesh of them all!’

Farid wasn’t listening. His own blood was roaring in his ears. Dustfinger was back! Back!

‘Let go of me, Chunk!’ Farid drove his elbows into Oss’s stomach and tugged at his hands. ‘Dustfinger will turn his fire on you!’ he shouted. ‘That’s what he’ll do, the moment he hears you two didn’t let me go to him at once!’

‘Really?’ Orpheus blew wine-laden breath into his face again. ‘I’m more inclined to think he’ll be grateful to me – or do you suppose he’d like you to bring him to his death again, you ill-omened brat? I warned him about you once before. He wouldn’t listen to me then, but he’ll have learnt better now, believe you me. If I had the book you came from here, I’d have read you back into your own story long ago, but sad to say it’s out of print in this world.’

Orpheus laughed. He liked to laugh at his own jokes. ‘Lock him in the cellar,’ he told the Chunk, ‘and as soon as it’s dark you can take him out to the hill where the gallows stand, and wring his neck. No one will notice a few bones more or less up there.’

Jasper put his hands over his eyes when Oss picked Farid up and threw him over his shoulder. Farid shouted and kicked, but

the Chunk hit him in the face so hard that he almost lost consciousness.

‘The Bluejay! The Bluejay! *I* sent him to the White Women! I did it!’ he heard Orpheus’s voice ringing down the stairs after them. ‘So why, by the devil’s tail, didn’t Death keep him? Didn’t I make that high-minded idiot sound tempting enough with the finest words I could write?’

At the bottom of the stairs Farid made another attempt to free himself, but Oss hit him in the face again so hard that blood ran from his nose, and then shifted him to his other shoulder. A maid, alarmed, stuck her face out of the kitchen doorway as he carried Farid past – it was the little brown-haired girl who was always making up to him, but she didn’t help him. How could she?

‘Get out!’ was all Oss growled at her before dragging Farid down to the cellar. He tied him to one of the pillars supporting Orpheus’s house, stuffed a dirty rag into his mouth, and left him alone, but not without giving him another vigorous kick first.

‘See you later, when it’s dark!’ he grunted before trudging back upstairs, and Farid was left behind with the cold stone at his back and the taste of his own tears in his mouth.

It hurt so much to know that Dustfinger was back, and all the same he would never see him again. But that’s how it will be, Farid, he told himself. And, who knows, maybe Cheesehead is right. Perhaps you’d only bring him to his death again!

His tears burnt his face, so sore from Oss’s blows. If only he could have called up fire to consume Orpheus, complete with his house and the Chunk, even if it meant that he too would burn! But he couldn’t move his hands, and his tongue could not conjure up a word of fire, so he just crouched there sobbing, as he had sobbed on the night of Dustfinger’s death, waiting for evening to come and Oss to fetch him and wring his neck, under the same gallows where he had dug up silver for Orpheus.

Luckily the marten had gone. Oss would certainly have killed him too. But presumably Jink had found his way to Dustfinger long ago. The marten would have sensed that he was back. Why didn't you sense it yourself, Farid? he wondered. Never mind, at least Jink was safe. But what would become of Jasper if he couldn't protect him any more? Orpheus had often shut the glass man up in a drawer without any light or sand, just for cutting paper clumsily or splashing ink on his master's sleeve!

'Dustfinger!' It did him good to at least try to whisper the name and know he was alive. How often Farid had imagined what it would be like to see him again. Longing made him tremble as if he were shaken by a fever. Which of the martens had jumped on Dustfinger's shoulder first to lick his scarred face, he wondered, Gwin or Jink?

The hours went by, and after a while Farid managed to spit out the gag. He tried gnawing through the rope that Oss had used to tie him up, but even a mouse could have done better. Would they look for him when he was lying dead and buried on the gallows hill? Dustfinger, Silvertongue, Meggie ... oh, Meggie. He would never kiss her again. Not that he'd done that so very often recently. All the same ... that bastard Cheeseface! Farid called down every curse he could remember on him – curses from this world, his own world, and the one where he had met Dustfinger. He shouted them all out loud, because that was the only way they worked – and fell silent in alarm when he heard the cellar door above him opening.

Was it evening already? Probably. How could anyone tell in this damp, mouldy hole? Would Oss break his neck like a rabbit's or simply press his fat hands down over his mouth until he couldn't breathe any more? Don't think about it, Farid, you'll find out soon enough. He pressed his back against the pillar. Perhaps he could at least kick Oss's nose in. A well-aimed kick at that stupid face when he was taking off Farid's bonds, and it would break like a dry twig. He desperately braced himself against the rough rope, but unfortunately Oss was good at tying

people up. *Meggie! Can't you send a few words to save me as you did for your father?* Fear was making his arms and legs weak. He listened to the footsteps coming down the stairs. They were surprisingly quiet for the Chunk. And suddenly two martens scurried towards him.

'By all the fairies, that moon-faced fellow really has been making money,' a voice whispered in the darkness. 'What a grand house!' A flame began dancing, then a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth ... five flames, just bright enough to light up Dustfinger's face – and Jasper sitting on his shoulder with a shy smile.

Dustfinger.

Farid's heart felt so light that he wouldn't have been surprised if it had simply floated out of him. But what had happened to Dustfinger's face? It looked different. As if all the years had been washed away, all the sad, lonely years, and—

'Your scars – they're gone!'

Farid could only whisper. Happiness muted his words like cotton wool. Jink jumped up to him and licked his bound hands.

'Yes, and would you believe it – I think Roxane misses them.' Dustfinger reached the bottom step of the stairs and knelt down beside him. From above, agitated voices came down to them.

Drawing a knife from his belt, Dustfinger cut through Farid's bonds. 'Hear that? I'm afraid Orpheus is about to find out he has a visitor.'

Farid rubbed his numb wrists. He couldn't take his eyes off Dustfinger. Suppose he was only a ghost after all – or even worse, nothing but a dream? But then would Farid have felt his warmth, and the beating of his heart when he leant over him? No more of the dreadful silence that had surrounded Dustfinger in the mine. And he smelt of fire.

The Bluejay had brought him back. Yes, it must have been him. Whatever Orpheus said. Oh, he'd write his name in fire on the city walls of Ombra – Silvertongue, Bluejay, whichever name he liked! Farid put out his hand and timidly touched Dustfinger's face, so familiar and yet so strange.

Dustfinger laughed quietly and raised him to his feet. 'What is it? Do you want to make sure I'm not a ghost? I expect you're still afraid of them, aren't you? Suppose I *was* a ghost?'

By way of answer Farid flung his arms around him so impetuously that Jasper, with a sharp little scream, slid off Dustfinger's shoulder. Luckily he caught the glass man before Gwin did.

'Careful, careful!' whispered Dustfinger, putting Jasper on to Farid's shoulder. 'You're still as clumsy as a young calf. You have your glass friend to thank for my being here. He told Brianna what Orpheus was planning to do to you, and she rode to Roxane.'

'Brianna?' The glass man blushed when Farid put him on his arm. 'Thank you, Jasper!'

Then he spun round. Orpheus's voice came ringing down the cellar stairs. 'A stranger? What are you talking about? How did he get past you?'

'It's the maid's fault!' Farid heard Oss protesting. 'The red-haired maid let him in through the back door!'

Dustfinger listened to the sounds above, smiling the old mocking smile that Farid had missed so much. Sparks were dancing on his shoulders and his hair. They seemed to be shining even under his skin, and Farid's own skin was hot, as if the fire had been licking it since he touched Dustfinger.

'The fire ...' he whispered. 'Is it in you?'

'Maybe,' Dustfinger whispered back. 'I'm probably not entirely what I was, but I can do a few interesting new things.'

'New things?'

Farid looked at him, eyes wide, but the voice of Orpheus came down again from above. 'Smells of fire, does he? Let me past, you human rhinoceros! Is his face scarred?'

'No. Why?' Oss sounded offended.

And footsteps came down the stairs again, heavy and uncertain footsteps this time. Orpheus hated climbing either up or down stairs, and Farid heard him cursing.

'Meggie read Orpheus here!' he whispered as he pressed close to Dustfinger's side. 'I asked her to do it because I thought he could bring you back!'

'Orpheus?' Dustfinger laughed again. 'No, it was only Silvertongue's voice I heard.'

'His voice perhaps, but it was my words that brought you back!' Orpheus stumbled down the last few steps, his face red from the wine. 'Dustfinger. It really is you!' There was genuine delight in his voice.

Oss appeared behind Orpheus, fear and rage on his coarse face. 'Look at him, my lord!' he managed to get out. 'He's not human. He's a demon, or a spirit of the night. See those sparks on his hair? When I tried to hold on to him I almost burnt my fingers – as if the executioner had put red-hot coals in my hands!'

'Yes, yes,' was all Orpheus said. 'He comes from far away, very far away. Such a journey can change a man.' He was staring at Dustfinger as if afraid he might dissolve into thin air at any moment – or, more likely, into a few lifeless words on a sheet of paper.

'I'm so glad you're back!' he stammered, his voice awkward with longing. 'And your scars have gone! How amazing. I didn't write that. Well, anyway ... you're back! This world is worth only half as much without you, but now it will all be as wonderful as it was when I first read about you in *Inkheart*. It was always the best of all stories, but now you'll be its hero –

you alone, thanks to my art that took you home and now has even brought you back from the realm of Death!’

‘Your art? More likely Silvertongue’s courage.’ Dustfinger made a flame dance on his hand. It took on the shape of a White Woman so distinctly that Oss cowered against the cellar wall in terror.

‘Nonsense!’ For a moment Orpheus sounded like a boy with hurt feelings, but he soon had himself in hand again. ‘Nonsense!’ he repeated, with more self-control this time, although his tongue was still rather thick from the wine. ‘Whatever he told you, it isn’t true. I did it all.’

‘He didn’t tell me anything. He didn’t have to. He was there, he and his voice.’

‘But I had the idea – and I wrote the words! He was only my tool.’ Orpheus spluttered the last word as furiously as if he were spitting it into Silvertongue’s face.

‘Ah yes ... your words! Very cunning words, according to all I’ve heard from him.’ The image of the White Woman was still burning on Dustfinger’s hand. ‘Maybe I ought to take those words to Silvertongue so that he can read them once more and find out what kind of part you intended him to play in all this.’

Orpheus stood up very straight. ‘I wrote them like that for you, only for you!’ he cried in an injured voice. ‘That was all I cared about – for you to come back. Why would that bookbinder interest me? After all, I had to offer Death something!’

Dustfinger blew gently into the flame burning on his hand. ‘Oh, I understand you very well!’ he said quietly, while the fire formed the shape of a bird, a golden bird with a red breast. ‘I understand a good deal now that I’ve been on the other side, and I know two things for sure: Death obeys no words, and Silvertongue – not you – went to the White Women.’

‘He was the only one who could call them. What was I supposed to do?’ cried Orpheus. ‘And he did it for his wife! Not

for you!’

‘Well now, I’d call that a good reason.’ The fiery bird fell apart in Dustfinger’s hand. ‘And as for the words ... to be honest, I like his voice so much better than yours, even if the sound of it didn’t always make me happy. Silvertongue’s voice is full of love. Yours speaks only of yourself. Quite apart from the fact that you’re much too fond of reading words no one knows about, or forgetting a few you promised to read. Isn’t that so, Farid?’

Farid just stared at Orpheus, his face rigid with hate.

‘Be that as it may,’ Dustfinger went on as the flame in his hand licked out of the ashes again, forming the shape of a tiny skull, ‘I’ll take the words with me. And the book.’

‘The book?’ Orpheus stepped back as if the fire on Dustfinger’s hand had turned into a snake.

‘Yes, *Inkheart*, you stole it from Farid, remember? That hardly makes it yours ... even if you seem to be busily making use of it, from all I hear. Rainbow-coloured fairies, spotted brownies, unicorns ... they say there are even dwarves in the castle now. What’s the idea of all that? Weren’t the blue fairies beautiful enough for you? The Milksop kicks the dwarves, and you bring unicorns here only to die.’

‘No, no!’ Orpheus raised his hands defensively. ‘You don’t understand! I have great plans for this story. I’m still working on them, but believe me, it will be wonderful! Fenoglio left so much unsaid, there was so much he didn’t describe – I’m going to change it all, I’m going to improve it ...’

Dustfinger turned his hand over and dropped the ashes on the floor of Orpheus’s cellar. ‘You sound like Fenoglio himself – but I’d guess you’re much worse than he is. This world is spinning its own threads. The two of you only confuse them – take them apart and put them together again in ways that don’t really fit, instead of leaving it to the people who live in the place to improve it.’

‘Like who, for instance?’ Orpheus’s voice turned vicious. ‘The Bluejay? Since when has he belonged here?’

Dustfinger shrugged his shoulders. ‘Who knows? Perhaps all of us belong in more than one story. Now, bring me the book. Or shall I ask Farid to go and get it?’

Orpheus was staring at him as bitterly as a rejected lover.

‘No!’ he got out at last. ‘I need it. The book stays here. You can’t take it away from me. I’m warning you. Fenoglio’s not the only one who can write words to harm you! I can—’

‘I’m not afraid of words any more,’ Dustfinger interrupted impatiently. ‘Neither yours nor Fenoglio’s. And neither of you was able to dictate how I’d die. Have you forgotten that?’ He reached into the air, and a burning torch grew from his hand. ‘Bring me the book,’ he said, giving it to Farid. ‘Bring everything he’s written. Every word.’

Farid nodded. He was back. Dustfinger was back!

‘You must take the list too!’ Jasper’s voice was as slight as his limbs. ‘The list he made me draw up. Of all the words Fenoglio used! I’m as far as the letter F.’

‘Ah, not a bad idea! A list. Thank you, glass man.’ Dustfinger smiled. No, his smile hadn’t changed. Farid was so glad he hadn’t left that behind with the White Women.

He put Jasper on his shoulder and went to the stairs. Jink ran after him. Orpheus tried to bar his way, but he flinched back when the torch left his glasses clouded and its flame singed his silk shirt. Oss was braver than his master, but in response to a whisper from Dustfinger the torch reached out to him with fiery hands, and before Oss had recovered from his fright Farid was past him. Agile as a gazelle, he leapt up the stairs, his heart full of happiness, and the taste of sweet revenge on his tongue.

‘Jasper!’ Orpheus called after him. ‘I’m going to smash you into such tiny splinters that no one will even be able to see what colour you were!’

The glass man dug his fingers into Farid's shoulder, but he didn't turn round.

'As for you, you lying little camel-driver –' Orpheus's voice broke – 'I'll make you disappear into a story full of horrible things specially written for you!'

The threat halted Farid for a moment, but then he heard Dustfinger's voice.

'Take care with your threats, Orpheus. If anything ever happens to the boy, or if he suddenly disappears – the fate you clearly intended for him this time – then I'll come to visit you again. And as you know, I never go anywhere without fire.'

'It was for you!' Farid heard Orpheus shouting. 'I did it all for you! Is this the thanks I get?'

Ironstone hurled furious abuse at Farid and his younger brother as soon as he realized what they were looking for in his master's study. But Jasper, unmoved, helped Farid to find first the book and then every scrap of paper that Orpheus had ever written on. Ironstone threw sand and sharp pens at them, he wished every imaginable disease that can afflict a glass man on Jasper, and finally flung himself heroically on the last sheet of paper that Jasper was rolling up on Orpheus's desk, but Farid merely pushed him roughly aside.

'Traitor!' shrieked Ironstone at his brother as Farid closed the door of the study behind him. 'I hope you're smashed into a thousand pieces!' But Jasper did not turn back, any more than he had at the threats made by Orpheus.

Dustfinger was already waiting at the front door of the house.

'Where are they?' asked Farid anxiously as he hurried towards him. There was no sign of Orpheus or Oss, but he could hear their angry voices.

'In the cellar,' said Dustfinger. 'I lost a little fire on the stairs. We'll be well into the forest before it goes out.'

Farid nodded, and turned as one of the maids appeared at the top of the stairs, but it wasn't Brianna.

'My daughter left,' said Dustfinger, as if he had read his thoughts. 'And I doubt if she'll be coming back to this house.'

'She hates me!' Farid stammered. 'Why did she help me?'

Dustfinger opened the door, and the martens scurried out. 'Perhaps she likes Orpheus even less than you,' he said.



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30

Sootbird's Fire

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

William Shakespeare,
Macbeth

Fenoglio was happy. He was happy even though Ivo and Despina had taken it into their heads to drag him off to the marketplace, where Sootbird was giving yet another show. The criers had been announcing it for days, and naturally Minerva wasn't letting the children go alone. The Milksop had had a platform specially made so that everyone could watch his

court fire-eater's incompetent performance. Did they hope such things would make the people forget that the Fire-Dancer was back? Never mind, not even Sootbird could cast a shadow over Fenoglio's cheerful mood. His heart hadn't been so light since he had set off with Cosimo for the Castle of Night. And he wasn't going to think of what had happened after that; no, that chapter was closed. His story had struck up a new song, and whose doing was that? His own! Who else had brought the Bluejay into the story, the man who had run rings around the Piper and the Milksop and brought the Fire-Dancer back from the dead? What a character! Orpheus's creations were grotesque by comparison: garishly coloured fairies, dead unicorns, dwarves with a blue tinge to their hair. Yes, that calf's-head could bring such creatures into being, but only he, Fenoglio, could think up men like the Black Prince and the Bluejay. Well – he had to admit that only Mortimer had made the Bluejay flesh and blood. But the words had come first, all the same, and it was he who had written them, every single one!

‘Ivo! Despina!’ Where were they, dammit? It was easier to catch Orpheus's rainbow-coloured fairies than those children! Hadn't he told them not to run too far ahead? Children were swarming all over the street, coming out of all the houses to forget, at least for an hour or so, the burdens the world had laid on their frail shoulders. It was no fun being a child in these dark times. The boys had become men too young, and the girls found their mothers' sadness hard to bear.

At first Minerva hadn't wanted to let Ivo and Despina go. There were too many soldiers in town, and too much work waiting at home, but Fenoglio had won her over, although he didn't like the thought of the stink that Sootbird would be spreading again. On a day when he was so happy, however, he wanted the children to be happy too, and while Sootbird put on his pathetic show he would simply dream of Dustfinger breathing fire in Ombra's marketplace in the near future. Or he would imagine the Bluejay riding into Ombra and chasing the

Milksop out of the gates like a mangy dog, knocking the silver nose off the Piper's face, and then, together with the Black Prince, founding a realm of justice, ruled by the people! Or, perhaps not entirely. This world hadn't reached that point yet, but never mind. It would be wonderful, it would move all hearts, and he, Fenoglio, had set the story on the course that would save it when he had written the first song about the Bluejay. In the end he'd done everything right! Well, perhaps Cosimo had been a mistake, but where would the excitement be in a story if it wasn't dark from time to time?

'Inkweaver! Where are you?' Ivo was waving to him impatiently. Did the boy think an old man could wriggle through this tide of children's bodies like an eel? Despina turned and smiled in relief when Fenoglio waved to her. But then her little head disappeared among all the others again.

'Ivo!' called Fenoglio. 'Ivo, keep an eye on your sister, can't you?'

Good heavens, he'd never known how many children there were in Ombra! Many of them were dragging their smaller brothers and sisters along after them as they flocked to the marketplace. Fenoglio was the only grown man to be seen, and few of the mothers had come. No doubt most of the children had stolen away on the sly – from workshops and stores, from housework or the stables. They had even come from the surrounding farms in their poor shabby clothes. Their clear voices were like the twittering of a flock of birds among the buildings. It was unlikely that Sootbird had ever had such an excited audience before.

He was already standing on the platform in the black and red costume worn by fire-eaters, but his clothes weren't patched together from rags like those of his brothers in the trade. They were made of the finest velvet, as befitted a prince's favourite. His ever-smiling face gleamed with the grease he used to protect it from the flames, but by now the fire had licked it so often that it looked like the masks Battista made from leather.

Sootbird was smiling again now as he looked down on the sea of little faces, crowding around the platform as eagerly as if he could release them from all their troubles, from hunger, from their mothers' sadness and from missing their dead fathers. Fenoglio saw Ivo at the very front, but where was Despina? Ah, over there, right beside her big brother. She waved excitedly to him, and he waved back as he joined the mothers waiting outside the houses. He heard them whispering about the Bluejay, and how he'd protect their children now that he had brought the Fire-Dancer back from the dead. Yes, the sun was shining on Ombra again. Hope was back, and he, Fenoglio, had given it a name. The Bluejay ...

Sootbird took off his cloak, which was so heavy and expensive that the price of it could surely have fed all the children crowded there in the marketplace for months. A brownie climbed up to him on the platform, hung about with bags full of the alchemists' powders that the inept fire-eater fed to the flames to make them obey him. Sootbird still feared the fire. You could see that clearly. Perhaps he feared it now more than ever, and Fenoglio felt uncomfortable, watching him begin his show. Flames sprayed and hissed, breathing out poison-green smoke that made the children cough. The fire formed shapes: menacing fists, claws, snapping mouths. Sootbird had been learning. He no longer waved a couple of torches about and breathed flames so poorly that everyone whispered Dustfinger's name. The fire he was playing with, though, seemed to be quite different. It was fire's dark brother, a nightmare made of flames, but the children watched the bright, evil spectacle, both fascinated and frightened. They jumped when the fire reached red claws out to them, and groaned in relief when it turned to nothing but smoke – although the smoke still hung in the air, acrid and making their eyes water. Was what people whispered true? Was it a fact that this smoke befuddled your senses so that you saw more than was really there? Well, if so, it doesn't work for me, thought Fenoglio as

he rubbed his smarting eyes. A set of wretched conjuring tricks, that's all I see!

Tears were running down his nose, and when he turned to wipe the soot and smoke out of his eyes he saw a boy come stumbling down the road from the castle. The lad was older than the children in the square, old enough to be one of Violante's beardless soldiers, but he wore no uniform. His face seemed strangely familiar to Fenoglio. Where had he seen him before?

'Luc!' the boy shouted. 'Luc! Run! All of you run!' He stumbled, fell, and crawled into a doorway just in time before the man pursuing him on horseback could ride him down. It was the Piper. He reined in his horse, while behind him a dozen men-at-arms surged along the road down from the castle. More of them came from every direction, Smiths' Street, Butchers' Street. They were coming out of every street and alley that led to the marketplace, riding in almost leisurely fashion on their great horses, armoured like their masters.

But the children kept staring up at Sootbird, suspecting nothing. They hadn't heard the boy's cries of warning. They didn't see the soldiers. They just stared at the fire while their mothers called their names. By the time the first of them turned it was too late. The men-at-arms drove back the weeping women, while more and more soldiers surged out of every street, enclosing the children in a ring of iron.

Horried, the little ones spun around. Amazement suddenly turned to pure fear. And the way they cried! How was Fenoglio ever to forget that crying? He stood there helplessly, his back to a wall, while five men-at-arms kept their lances pointed at him and the women. No more were needed. Five lances to keep the little group in check. One of the women ran for it all the same, but a soldier rode her down. Then they formed a circle of swords as Sootbird, at a nod from the Piper, extinguished his flames and bowed to the weeping children with a smile.

They drove them up to the castle like a flock of lambs. Some of the little ones were so frightened that they ran here and there among the horses, and were left lying on the paving of the road like broken toys. Fenoglio called the names of Ivo and Despina, but his voice merged with all the others, with all the screaming and sobbing. When the men-at-arms let the mothers go, he too stumbled over to the children who had been left behind, bleeding. He stared at the pale faces, terrified of recognizing Despina or Ivo. They weren't there, but Fenoglio felt as though he knew the faces all the same. Such small faces. Too young to die, too young for pain and terror. Two White Women appeared, his angels of death. And the mothers bent over the children and closed their ears to that white whispering. Three were dead, two boys and a girl. They no longer needed the White Women to make the crossing to the other side.

The lad who had stumbled along the street shouting his warning in vain was kneeling beside one of the dead boys. He stared up at the platform, his young face old with hatred. But Sootbird was gone, as if he had dissolved into the venomous smoke that hung in dense swathes over the marketplace. Only the brownie still stood there looking down, dazed, at the women bending over the children. Then, as slowly as if he had fallen out of ordinary time, he began collecting the empty bags left behind by Sootbird. A few of the women had run after the soldiers and the children they were taking away. The rest knelt there, wiped blood from the foreheads of the injured and felt their small limbs.

Fenoglio couldn't bear it any more. He turned and walked back, unsteadily, to the street where Minerva's house stood. Women came the other way, brought out of their houses by the screaming. They ran past him. It was too much! Too much! Minerva herself came running towards him. He stammered a few broken words, pointed to the castle. She ran after the other women.

It was such a fine day. The sun was as warm as if winter were still a long way off.

How was he ever going to forget that weeping? Fenoglio was amazed that his legs could still carry his tear-drenched heart up the stairs.

‘Rosenquartz!’ He supported himself on his table, looked for parchment, paper, anything he could write on. ‘Rosenquartz! Damn it all, where are you?’

The glass man peered out of the nest where Orpheus’s rainbow-coloured fairies lived. What the devil was he doing up there? Wringing their silly necks?

‘If you were thinking of sending me off to spy on Orpheus again, forget it!’ Rosenquartz called down to him. ‘That Ironstone has gone and pushed the glass man Orpheus got to replace his brother out of the window! He’s so badly smashed he looks like the remains of a wine bottle!’

‘I don’t need you to go spying!’ snapped Fenoglio, in a voice muffled by tears. ‘Sharpen me some pens! Get stirring that ink, and jump to it!’

Ah, this weeping.

He sank down on his chair and buried his face in his hands. Tears ran through his fingers and dripped on to the table. Fenoglio couldn’t remember ever having cried so much. Even Cosimo’s death had left him dry-eyed. Ivo! Despina!

He heard the glass man landing on his bed. Hadn’t he told him not to jump out of the fairy nests? Never mind. Let him break his glass neck if he liked. So much misfortune! There must be an end to it, or his old heart really would break!

He heard Rosenquartz hastily clambering up the table leg. ‘Here you are,’ said the glass man in a muted voice, offering him a freshly sharpened quill.

Fenoglio wiped the tears away from his face with his sleeve. His fingers were shaking as he took the pen. The glass man

pushed a piece of paper over to him and quickly set about stirring the ink.

‘Where are the children?’ he asked. ‘Weren’t you going to the marketplace with them?’

Another tear. It fell on the blank sheet, and the paper greedily soaked it up. Just like this wretched story, thought Fenoglio. Feeding on tears! Suppose Orpheus had written what happened in the marketplace? Folk said he had hardly left his house since the day of Dustfinger’s visit to him, and he kept throwing bottles out of the window. In his rage, could he have written words to kill a few children?

Stop it, Fenoglio, don’t go thinking about Orpheus! Write something yourself! He wished the paper wasn’t so blank. ‘Come on!’ he whispered. ‘Come here, words, will you? They’re children! Children! Save them!’

‘Fenoglio?’ Rosenquartz was looking at him with concern. ‘Where are Ivo and Despina? What’s happened?’

But all Fenoglio could do was bury his face in his hands again. Where were the words to open those accursed castle gates, break the lances, roast Sootbird in his own fire?

It was Minerva who told Rosenquartz what had happened – when she came back from the castle without her children. The Piper had made another speech.

‘He says he’s tired of waiting,’ Minerva told him in a toneless voice. ‘He’s giving us a week to bring him the Bluejay. Or he’ll take our children away to the mines!’

Then she went down to her empty kitchen, where no doubt the bowls from which Ivo and Despina had eaten that morning still stood. And Fenoglio sat there in front of the blank sheet of paper which showed nothing but the traces of his tears. Hour after hour, until late into the night.



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31

The Bluejay's Answer

'I *want* to be of use,' Homer began, but Dr. Larch wouldn't listen.

'Then you are not permitted to hide,' said Larch. 'You are not permitted to look away.'

John Irving,
The Cider House Rules

Resa, her face pale, was writing in her best script. Just as she had long ago when she used to sit in men's clothes in Ombra marketplace, earning her living as a scribe. Orpheus's former glass man was stirring the ink for her. Dustfinger had brought Jasper back to the robbers' cave with him. And Farid too.

This is the Bluejay's answer, wrote Resa, with Mo standing beside her. *In three days' time he will give himself up to Violante,*

widow of Cosimo and mother of the rightful heir of Ombra. In exchange the Piper will set free the children of Ombra whom he tricked into his power. This agreement shall be sealed with his master's seal, so that they may be safe for all time.

Only when this condition is met will the Bluejay be prepared to cure the White Book that he bound for the Adderhead in the Castle of Night.

Meggie saw her mother's hand falter again and again as she wrote. The robbers stood around, watching her. A woman who could write ... apart from Battista, none of them had that skill, not even the Black Prince. They had all tried to keep Mo from giving himself up – even Doria, who had done his best to warn the children of Ombra, and then had to watch as the Piper caught them, and his best friend Luc was killed.

In vain. Only one person hadn't even attempted to make Mo change his mind: Dustfinger.

It seemed almost as if he'd never been away, even though his face now had no scars. The same smile, enigmatic as ever, the same swift movements. He was here one moment, gone the next. Like a ghost. Meggie found herself thinking so again and again – yet at the same time she sensed that Dustfinger was more alive than ever before, more alive than anyone.

Mo looked her way, but Meggie wasn't sure that he really saw her. Ever since he had come back from the White Women, he seemed to be more the Bluejay than ever.

How could he give himself up as a prisoner? The Piper would kill him!

Resa had finished writing the letter. She looked at Mo as if hoping, just for a moment, that he would throw the parchment on the fire. But he only took the pen from her hand and added his sign under the deadly words – a pen and a sword forming a cross, in the way peasants made their mark instead of signing their names, because they didn't understand letters.

No.

No!

Resa bowed her head. Why didn't she say anything? Why couldn't she shed some tears to make him change his mind this time? Had she used them all up on that endless night among the graves when they stood waiting in vain for him to come back? Did Resa know what Mo had promised the White Women in return for letting him and Dustfinger go again? 'I may soon have to go away,' was all he had told Meggie. And when she had asked, full of fear, 'Go away? Where to?' all he had said was, 'Don't look at me so anxiously! Wherever I go, I've visited Death and come back safe and sound. It can hardly be more dangerous than that, can it?'

She ought to have asked more questions, but Meggie had felt too glad, indescribably glad, that she hadn't lost him for ever ...

'You're out of your mind! I've said so before and I'll say it again!'

Snapper was drunk. He stood there red in the face, his brusque voice breaking the oppressive silence so suddenly that the glass man dropped the pen Mo had handed him.

'Giving yourself up to the Adder's spawn in the hope that she can protect you from the Piper! He'll soon teach you better. And even if Silvernose leaves you alive – do you still think his master's daughter will help you to write in that damn book? You must have left your reason behind with Death! Her Ugliness will sell you for the throne of Ombra. And the Piper will send the children to the mines all the same!'

Many of the robbers murmured agreement, but they fell silent when the Black Prince went to Mo's side.

'How are *you* going to get the children out of the castle, then, Snapper?' he asked evenly. 'I don't like to think of the Bluejay riding through the castle gates of Ombra either, but if he doesn't give himself up, then what? I couldn't answer him when he asked that question, and believe me, I've been thinking of nothing else since Sootbird's performance! Are we to attack the

castle with the few men we have? Will you lie in ambush when they take the children through the Wayless Wood? How many men-at-arms will be guarding them? Fifty? A hundred? How many dead children do you expect to see if you try freeing them that way?’

The Black Prince scrutinized the ragged men standing around him. Many of them lowered their heads, but Snapper defiantly thrust out his chin. The scar on his neck was as red as a fresh cut.

‘I’ll ask you once again, Snapper,’ said the Black Prince quietly. ‘How many children would die if we tried rescuing them like that? Would we manage to save even one?’

Snapper didn’t reply. He just stared at Mo. Then he spat, turned, and marched away, followed by Gecko and a dozen others. But Resa took the written sheet of parchment without a word and folded it so that Jasper could seal it. Her face was as expressionless as if it were made of stone, like the face of Cosimo the Fair in the vault in Ombra Castle, but her hands were trembling so much that finally Battista went over and folded the parchment for her.

Three days once again. Mo had been gone with the White Women for that long as well – three endless days that had made Meggie believe her father was dead beyond recall this time, and it was her mother’s fault. And Farid’s too. She hadn’t exchanged a single word with either of them during those three days, and when Resa approached her she had pushed her away.

‘Meggie, why are you looking at your mother like that?’ Mo had asked her on the first day after his return. Why? The White Women took you away because of her, she wanted to say, and then didn’t. She knew she was being unfair, but the coolness between her and Resa was still there. She couldn’t forgive Farid either.

He was standing beside Dustfinger, and was the only one who didn’t look depressed. Of course. Why would Farid care that her

father was about to hand himself over to the Piper? Dustfinger was back. Nothing else counted. He had tried to make up their quarrel. 'Come on, Meggie. No harm came to your father – and he brought Dustfinger back!' Yes, that was all that interested him. And all that ever would.

Jasper had let sealing wax drop on to the parchment, and Mo pressed his stamp on it, the one he'd carved for the book of Resa's drawings. A unicorn's head. The bookbinder's seal for the robber's promise. Mo gave Dustfinger the letter, exchanged a few words with Resa and the Black Prince, and came over to Meggie.

When she was still so small that she stood no higher than his elbow, she would often push her head under his arm when something scared her. But that was long ago. 'What does Death look like, Mo?' she had asked. 'Did you really see Death himself?' The memory didn't seem to frighten him, but his eyes had immediately wandered far, far away. 'Death has many shapes, but the voice of a woman.' 'A woman?' Meggie had asked in surprise. 'But Fenoglio would never give a woman such a big part in his story!'

And Mo had laughed and replied, 'I don't think it was Fenoglio who wrote Death's part, Meggie.'

She wouldn't look up at him when he stopped in front of her. 'Meggie?' He put his hand under her chin so that she had to meet his eyes. 'Don't look so sad. Please!'

Behind him, the Black Prince took Battista and Doria aside. She could imagine what instructions he had for them. He was sending them to Ombra, to spread the news among the desperate mothers there that the Bluejay would not let their stolen children down. But what about his own daughter? Meggie thought, and was sure that Mo saw the accusation in her eyes.

Without a word, he took her hand and drew her away from the tents, away from the robbers, and away from Resa, who was

still standing by the fire. She was wiping the ink from her fingers, wiping and wiping, while Jasper watched sympathetically. It was as if she were trying to wipe away the words she had written.

Mo stopped under one of the oak trees. Their branches stretched above the camp like a sky made of wood and yellowing leaves. He held Meggie's hand and ran his forefinger over it as if he were surprised to find how large it was now – yet her hands were still so much slimmer than his. A girl's hands ...

'The Piper will kill you.'

'No, he won't. But if he tries I'll be happy to show him how sharp a bookbinder's knife is. Battista is going to sew me a place to hide a knife again, and believe me, I'll be very happy if that child-murderer gives me an opportunity to try it out on him.' Hatred fell over his face like a shadow. The Bluejay.

'The knife won't be any help. He'll kill you just the same.' She sounded stupid. Like a defiant child. But she was so afraid for him.

'Three children are dead, Meggie. Go to Doria and ask him to tell you again how they herded them together. They'll kill them all if the Bluejay doesn't give himself up!'

The Bluejay. He sounded as if he meant someone else. How dim did he think she was?

'It's not your story, Mo! Let the Black Prince save the children.'

'How? The Piper will kill them all if he tries.' There was so much fury in his eyes. And for the first time Meggie realized that Mo wasn't riding to the castle only to save the living children, but also to avenge the dead. That idea frightened her even more.

'Yes, I see. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps there really isn't any other way,' she said. 'But at least let me come with you! So that

I can help you. Like in the Castle of Night!’ It seemed only yesterday that Firefox had pushed her into Mo’s cell. Had he forgotten how glad he’d been to have her with him? Had he forgotten that it was she, with some help from Fenoglio, who had saved him?

No, she was sure he hadn’t. But Meggie had only to look at him to know that in spite of everything he would go alone this time. All alone.

‘Do you remember the robber stories I used to tell you?’ he asked.

‘Of course. They all end badly.’

‘And why? It’s always the same. Because the robber wants to protect someone he loves, and they kill him for that. Right?’

Oh, he was so clever. Had he said the same thing to her mother? But I know him better than Resa, thought Meggie, and I know far more stories than she does. ‘What about the highwayman poem?’ she asked. Elinor had read it to her countless times. She could still hear her sighing, ‘Oh, Meggie, why don’t you read it aloud for a change? We don’t have to mention it to your father, but I’d just love to see that highwayman galloping through my house!’

Mo smoothed the hair back from her forehead. ‘What about it?’

‘The girl he loves warns him about the soldiers, and he escapes! Daughters can do that kind of thing too.’

‘Yes, indeed! Daughters are very good at rescuing their fathers. No one knows that better than me.’ He had to smile. She loved his smile. Suppose she never saw it again? ‘But don’t you remember how the poem ends for the girl too?’ he added.

Of course Meggie remembered. *Her musket shattered the moonlight, shattered her breast in the moonlight.* And in the end the soldiers killed the highwayman after all. *And he lay in his blood on the highway, with the bunch of lace at his throat.*

‘Meggie ...’

She turned her back to him. She didn’t want to look at him any more. She didn’t want to feel afraid for him any more. She simply wanted to be angry with him, that was all. Just as she was angry with Farid, angry with Resa. Loving someone merely meant pain. Nothing but pain.

‘Meggie!’ Mo took her shoulders and turned her round. ‘Suppose I don’t ride to Ombra – how would you like the song they’d sing then? *And one morning the Bluejay disappeared and was never seen again. But the children of Ombra died on the other side of the forest, like their fathers, and the Adderhead reigned for all eternity because of the White Book that the Bluejay had bound for him.*’

Yes, he was right. That was a terrible song, yet Meggie knew one that would be even worse: *But the Bluejay rode to the castle to save the children of Ombra, and died there. And although the Fire-Dancer wrote his name in the sky with fiery letters so that the stars whisper it every night, his daughter never saw him again.*

That was how it would turn out, yes. But Mo was listening to a different song.

‘Fenoglio’s not going to write us a happy ending this time, Meggie!’ he said. ‘I’ll have to write it myself, but with actions instead of words. Only the Bluejay can save the children. Only he can write the three words in the White Book.’

She still didn’t look at him. She didn’t want to hear what he was saying. But Mo went on in the voice she loved so much, the voice that had sung her to sleep, comforted her when she was sick, and told her stories about the mother who had disappeared.

‘I just want you to promise me something,’ he said. ‘You and your mother must look after each other while I’m gone. The two of you can’t go back. There’s no trusting Orpheus’s words! But the Prince will protect you, and so will the Strong Man. He’s promised me on his brother’s life, and he’s certainly a

much better protector than I am. Do you hear, Meggie? Whatever happens, stay with the robbers. Don't go to Ombra, and don't follow me to the Castle of Night if they take me there! I wouldn't be able to think straight if I found out that you two were in danger. Promise me!

Meggie bowed her head so that he wouldn't read her answer in her eyes. No. No, she wasn't going to make him any promises. And she was sure Resa hadn't either. Or had she? Meggie glanced over at her mother. She looked terribly sad. The Strong Man was beside her. Unlike Meggie, he had forgiven Resa once Mo had come back safe and sound.

'Meggie, please listen to me!' Usually Mo began making jokes when he thought the mood was getting too serious, but obviously that had changed too. His voice sounded as serious and down-to-earth as if he were discussing a school trip with her. 'If I don't come back,' he said, 'you must get Fenoglio to write words to take you and your mother home to Elinor in our old world. He can't have forgotten how to do it entirely, after all. Then you can read his words and take the three of you back, you and Resa – and your brother.'

'Brother? I want a sister.'

'Ah, do you?' Now he was smiling after all. 'Good. I want another daughter too. My first has grown too big to be picked up in my arms.'

They looked at each other, and there were so many words that Meggie wanted to say, but not one that really expressed what she was feeling.

'Who's going to take the letter to the castle?' she asked quietly.

'We don't know yet,' replied Mo. 'It won't be easy to find someone who'll be allowed access to Violante.'

Three days to go from the time Her Ugliness would get the letter and the Piper would accept the terms. Meggie hugged him as hard as she used to when she was a small child. 'Please,

Mo!’ she said softly. ‘Don’t go! Please! Let’s all go back. Resa was right!’

‘Go back? Meggie! Go back now, just when it’s getting exciting?’ he whispered to her. So he hadn’t changed so very much after all. He still cracked jokes when he thought things were getting too serious. She loved him so much.

Mo took her face between his hands. He looked at her as if he were going to say something to her, and for a moment Meggie thought she read in his eyes that he was as frightened for her sake as she was for his.

‘Believe me, Meggie!’ he said. ‘I’m also riding to that castle to protect you. Someday you’ll understand that. Didn’t the two of us already know in the Castle of Night that I was binding the White Book for the Adderhead only to write those three words in it some time in the future?’

Meggie shook her head so hard that Mo hugged her again.

‘Yes, Meggie!’ he said quietly. ‘Yes, we did.’

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At Last

There, in the night, where none can spy
all in my hunter's camp I lie,
and play at books that I have read
till it is time to go to bed.
These are the hills, these are the woods,
these are my starry solitudes,
and there the river by whose brink
the roaring lions come to drink.

R.L. Stevenson,
The Land of Story Books

Darius read wonderfully, although in his mouth the words sounded very different from the way Mortimer would have read them (and of course very different again from the voice of Orpheus, that defiler of books). Perhaps Darius's art

was most like Meggie's. He read with the innocence of a child, and it seemed to Elinor as if, for the first time, she saw the boy he had once been – a thin, bespectacled boy who loved books as passionately as she did, but with the difference that for him the pages came to life.

Darius's voice was not as full and beautiful as Mortimer's, nor did it have the enthusiasm that lent Orpheus's voice its power. No, Darius took the words on his tongue as carefully as if they might break apart there, might lose their meaning if they were spoken in too loud and firm a tone. All the sadness of the world lay in Darius's voice: the magic of the weak, the quiet and cautious, and their knowledge of the pitiless minds of the strong ...

The music of Orpheus's words amazed Elinor as much as on the day she first heard him read them. Those words didn't sound at all like the work of the vain fool who had thrown her books at the library walls. Well, that's because he stole them from someone else, thought Elinor, and then she thought of nothing more at all.

Darius's tongue didn't stumble once – perhaps because this time not fear but love made him read. He opened the door between the letters on the page so gently that Elinor felt as if they were stealing into Fenoglio's world like two children slipping into a forbidden room.

When she suddenly found a wall behind her she dared not believe what her fingers were feeling. *At first you think it's a dream.* Wasn't that how Resa had described it? Well, if this is a dream, thought Elinor, then I never intend to wake up! Her eyes greedily drank in the images suddenly flooding in on her: a square, a well, houses leaning against each other as if they were too old to stand up straight, women in long dresses (most of them very shabby), a flock of sparrows, pigeons, two thin cats, a cart and an old man shovelling garbage into it ... heavens above, the stench was almost unbearable, but all the same Elinor breathed it in deeply.

Ombra! She was in Ombra! What else could her surroundings be? A woman drawing water at the well turned and looked suspiciously at the heavy dark-red velvet dress Elinor was wearing. Oh, drat it! She had hired the dress from a theatrical costume agency, along with the tunic Darius was wearing. She'd asked for 'something medieval', and now here she stood looking as conspicuous as a peacock among a flock of crows!

Never mind. You're here, Elinor! When something pulled her hair rather roughly, tears of joy came to her eyes. With a practised move, she caught the fairy who was about to make off with a grey strand of it. How she'd missed those tiny, fluttering creatures! But hadn't they been blue? This one shimmered in all the iridescent colours of a soap bubble. Captivated, Elinor closed her hands around her catch and examined the fairy through her fingers. The little creature looked rather sleepy. This was wonderful! When the tiny teeth dug into her thumb and the fairy escaped Elinor laughed out loud, making two women put their heads out of the nearby windows.

Elinor!

She clapped her hand to her mouth, but she could still feel laughter like sherbet powder fizzing on her tongue. Oh, she was so happy, so idiotically happy. She hadn't felt like this since she was six years old and stole into her father's library to get at the books he wouldn't let her read. Perhaps you ought to drop dead here and now, Elinor, she told herself. At this very moment. How can things get any better?

Two men in colourful garments were crossing the square. Strolling players! They didn't look quite as romantic as Elinor had imagined the Motley Folk, but never mind ... they were minstrels, and a brownie was carrying their instruments. His hairy face looked so bemused when he saw her that Elinor instinctively felt her nose. Had something happened to her face? No, surely her nose had always been that size, hadn't it?

'Elinor?'

She turned. Darius! For heaven's sake, she'd completely forgotten him. What was he doing under the rubbish cart?

Looking bewildered, he crawled out from between the wooden wheels and plucked a few not-very-clean blades of straw off his tunic. Oh, Darius! Of all places in the Inkworld, he had to land under a load of garbage! Just like him! He was a walking disaster area. And the way he was looking around him – as if he'd fallen among thieves. Poor Darius. Wonderful Darius. He was still holding the sheet of paper with Orpheus's words on it, but where was the bag with all the things they'd meant to bring?

Just a moment, Elinor, *you* were going to bring it. She looked around – and instead of the bag saw Cerberus beside her, snuffling at the strange paving stones with great interest.

'H-h-he'd have starved to death if we'd left him behind,' stuttered Darius, still brushing straw off his tunic. 'A-a-anyway I suppose he can lead us to his master, and maybe he'll know where we can find the others.'

Not a bad idea, Elinor told herself. I'd never have thought of that. But what was making him stammer again?

'Darius! You did it!' she whispered, hugging him so hard that his glasses slipped. 'Thank you! Thank you so, so much!'

'Hey, you there, where'd that dog come from?'

Cerberus pressed close to Elinor's legs, growling. Two soldiers were facing them. *The soldiers are worse than the highwaymen.* Hadn't Resa told her that too? *Most of them will kill for fun some time or other.*

Involuntarily, Elinor took a step back, but she just came up against the wall of the house behind her.

'Well, cat got your tongues?' One of the men punched Darius in the belly with his gloved fist, so hard that he doubled up.

'What do you think you're doing? Leave him alone!' Elinor's voice didn't sound half as fearless as she had hoped. 'That's my

dog.'

'Yours?' The soldier approaching her had only one eye. Fascinated, Elinor stared at the place where the other eye had once been. 'Only princesses may keep dogs. Trying to tell me you're a princess?'

He drew his sword and ran the blade over Elinor's dress. 'And what sort of clothes are those? You think they make you look a fine lady? What seamstress made that dress? She ought to be put in the pillory, so she ought!'

The other soldier laughed. 'The strolling players wear such garments!' he said. 'She's a minstrel woman rather past her prime.'

'A minstrel woman? Nah, too ugly for that.' The one-eyed man scrutinized Elinor as if he were about to strip her dress off.

She longed to tell him what she thought of his own appearance, but Darius cast her a pleading glance, and the point of the sword pressed menacingly against her stomach as if the one-eyed soldier was thinking of boring a second navel in it. Look down, Elinor! Remember what Resa said. Women keep their eyes lowered in this world.

'Please!' With difficulty, Darius scrambled to his feet. 'We ... we're strangers here. W-w-we come from far away ...'

'And you come to Ombra?' The soldiers laughed. 'By the Adderhead's silver, who'd come here of his own free will?'

The one-eyed man was staring at Darius. 'Take a look at this!' he said, lifting off his glasses. 'He's got the same kind of frame thing as Four-Eyes, the fellow that got the unicorn and the dwarf for the Milksop.'

Making a big performance of it, he perched the glasses on his own nose.

'Hey, take that off!' The other man uneasily retreated.

The one-eyed soldier blinked at him through one thick lens and grinned. 'I can see all your lies. All your black lies!'

Laughing, he threw the glasses at Darius's feet.

'Wherever you come from,' he said, reaching out for Cerberus's collar, 'you're going back without any dog. Dogs belong to princes. This one's an ugly brute, but the Milksop will like it all the same.'

Cerberus bit the gloved hand so hard that the soldier screamed and fell to his knees. The other man drew his sword, but Orpheus's dog wasn't half as stupid as he was ugly. With the soldier's glove still in his jaws, he turned and ran for his life.

'Quick, Elinor!' Darius swiftly snatched up his twisted glasses and dragged her away with him, while the soldiers, cursing, stumbled off in pursuit of the hell-hound. Elinor couldn't remember when she had last run so fast – and even if her heart still felt like a young girl's, her legs were the legs of a rather too stout old woman.

Elinor, this was not the way you imagined your first hours in Ombra, she told herself as she followed Darius down an alley so narrow that she was afraid of getting stuck between the houses. But even if her feet hurt, and she could still feel the tip of that one-eyed oaf's sword in her stomach – never mind! She was in Ombra! At last she was behind the letters on the page! That was all that mattered. And it was hardly to be expected that life would be as tranquil here as in her house at home – leaving aside the fact that it hadn't been so tranquil there either recently. Well, never mind that ... she was here! She was here at last! In the only story with an ending that she really wanted to know, because all the people she loved were in it.

But it's a pity the dog has gone, she thought, as Darius stopped at the end of the alley, unsure which way to go. Cerberus's ugly nose would have come in very useful in this maze of alleyways, and she was probably going to miss him too. Resa, Meggie, Mortimer – she felt like shouting their names through the streets. Where are you? I'm here, I'm here at last!

But perhaps *they're* not here any more, Elinor, a voice inside her whispered, while the strange sky above them grew dark. Perhaps the three of them died long ago. Hush, she thought. Hush, Elinor. That thought wasn't allowed. It simply was not allowed.



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Herbs for Her Ugliness

The soul is silent.
If it speaks at all
it speaks in dreams.

Louise Glück,
Child Crying Out

Violante went down to the dungeons where the Milksop had imprisoned the children several times a day, with two maids who were still loyal to her, and one of the boys who served her as soldiers. Child soldiers, the Piper called them, but her father had made sure that these boys weren't children any more when he had their fathers and brothers slaughtered in the Wayless Wood. And the children in the dungeons soon wouldn't be children either. Fear was making them grow up fast.

The mothers stood outside the castle, begging the guards at least to let them go in to see their youngest children. They brought clothes, dolls, food, in the hope that at least some of it might end up in the hands of their sons and daughters. But the guards threw most of these things away, although Violante kept sending her maids to them to collect what the mothers had brought.

Fortunately the Piper did at least allow her to do that. Fooling the Milksop was easy. He was even more stupid than his doll-like sister, and had never realized how Violante was spinning her web behind his back. But the Piper was clever, and only two things made it possible to manipulate him: his fear of the Adderhead and his vanity. Violante had flattered the Piper from the day he first rode into Ombra. She made out that she was glad he had come, saying she was tired of the Milksop's feeble stupidity. She told the Piper how he squandered money, and commissioned Balbulus to write out the Piper's dark songs on his best parchment and illuminate them (even though the commission made Balbulus so furious that he broke three of his most valuable brushes before her eyes).

After Sootbird had lured the children into the trap on the Piper's orders, Violante had praised the silver-nosed man for his wiliness – and was sick in her bedchamber later. Nor did she let him see that these days she couldn't sleep because she thought she heard the children crying in the dungeons by night. She wasn't letting him know that.

She had been just four herself when her father had her and her mother shut up in the Old Chamber in the Castle of Night, but her mother had taught her to hold her head high all the same. 'You've a man's heart, Violante,' her father-in-law had once told her. Sad, stupid old man. To this day she didn't know if he had been paying her a compliment or expressing disapproval. She knew only that all the things she most wanted belonged to men: freedom, knowledge, strength, cleverness. Power ...

Was the thirst for revenge masculine too, or a wish to rule, or impatience with others? She'd inherited all those from her father.

Her Ugliness ...

Her disfiguring birthmark had faded, but the name stuck. It was part of her, like her very pale face and ridiculously slight body. 'Her Craftiness, that's what they ought to call you,' Balbulus sometimes said. No one knew her better than Balbulus. No one saw through her more clearly, and Violante knew that whenever Balbulus hid a fox in one of his pictures he meant her. Her Craftiness. She was certainly crafty. The sight of the Piper made her physically ill, but she smiled at him as she had learnt to do from watching her father: with condescension mingled with a touch of cruelty. She wore shoes that made her look taller (Violante had always hated being so short) but she did nothing to make her face prettier, since it was her opinion that beautiful women might be desired but were never respected, certainly not feared. Anyway, she would have felt ridiculous with her lips painted red or her brows plucked to a narrow arch.

Some of the child prisoners were injured. The Piper had allowed Violante to send the Barn Owl to tend them, but there was no persuading him to let them go. 'Not until we've caught our bird,' he had replied to her request. 'They're here as bait for him!'

And Violante had seen it in her mind's eye – she saw them dragging the Bluejay to the castle once the mothers weeping down there outside the gates had given him away. He was bleeding like the unicorn that the Milksop had killed in the forest. That image remained with her, even clearer than the pictures that Balbulus painted, but in her dreams she saw another. In that one the Bluejay killed her father and set a crown on her head, on her mouse-brown hair ...

‘The Bluejay will soon be a dead man,’ Balbulus had said to her only yesterday. ‘I hope he’ll at least ensure that his death makes a good picture.’

Violante could have struck him in the face, but her anger had never yet impressed him. ‘Take care, Your Ugliness,’ he had murmured to her. ‘You’re always giving your love to the wrong men. But at least the last one had blue blood.’

She should have had his tongue cut out for such impertinence – her father would have done it on the spot – but then who would tell her the truth, much as it might hurt? Brianna used to. But Brianna had gone.

Outside, the second night was falling on the children in the dungeons, and Violante had just asked one of her maids to bring her hot wine, hoping that for a few hours it would at least make her forget those little faces, the small hands clutching her skirt, when Vito entered her room.

‘Your Highness!’ The boy was just fifteen, and the oldest of her soldiers, the son of a smith. A dead smith, of course. ‘Your former maidservant is at the gate. Brianna, that woman healer’s daughter.’

Tullio cast Violante a doubtful glance. He had wept when she had turned Brianna out. For that she wouldn’t allow him to come to her room for more than two days.

Brianna. Had Violante’s own thoughts summoned her? The name still sounded so comforting. She’d probably spoken it more often than her son’s. Why was her silly heart beating faster? Had it already forgotten how much pain the girl had caused it? Her father was right: the heart was a weak, changeable thing, bent on nothing but love, and there could be no more fatal mistake than to make it your master. Reason must be in charge. It comforted you for the heart’s foolishness, it sang mocking songs about love, derided it as a whim of nature, transient as flowers. So why did she still keep following her heart?

It was her heart that leapt up at the sound of Brianna's name, while her reason asked: what does she want here? Does she miss her comfortable life? Is she tired of being a maid scrubbing floors for Four-Eyes, who bows so low to the Milksop that his chin almost collides with his plump knees? Or is she going to beg me to let her go down into the vault to kiss my dead husband's mouth?

'Brianna says she's bringing herbs from her mother for the children in the dungeon. But she'll give them only to you in person.'

Tullio looked pleadingly at her. He had no pride, but a loyal heart. Too loyal. Yesterday a few of the Milksop's friends had shut him in the dog-pens with the hounds again. Her own son had been with them.

'Good. Go and bring her in, Tullio!' Your voice can give you away, but Violante knew how to make hers sound indifferent. Only once had she shown what she really felt, when Cosimo had come back – and then she felt all the more ashamed to find that he preferred her maidservant to her.

Brianna.

Tullio shot eagerly off, and Violante patted her hair, which was severely pinned back, and looked dubiously at her dress and the jewels she was wearing. Brianna had that effect on people. She was so beautiful that everyone felt clumsy and colourless in her presence. Violante had once liked that. She had hidden behind Brianna's beauty, relishing the fact that her maid made others feel as she herself always did – ugly. It had pleased her that so much beauty served her, admired her, perhaps even loved her.

Tullio was smiling foolishly all over his furry face as he came back with Brianna. She hesitated as she entered the room where she had spent so many hours. It was said that she wore a coin with Cosimo's picture around her neck, and kissed it so often that by now the face could hardly be made out. But grief had

only made her more beautiful. How could that be? How could there be any justice in the world if even beauty wasn't fairly shared out?

Brianna sank down in a low curtsy – no one could do it more charmingly – and handed Violante a basket full of herbs. 'My mother has heard from the Barn Owl that some of the children are hurt, and many won't eat. These herbs may help. She has written to tell you how they work and how they must be given.' Brianna took a sealed letter out from under the leaves, handing it to Violante with another curtsy.

A seal, for a healer's instructions?

Violante sent away the maid who was busy turning back her bed – she didn't trust the girl – and picked up her new reading glasses. The same glazier who had made a new frame for the glasses worn by Four-Eyes – a gold frame, of course – had made hers. She had paid him with her last ring. The glasses did not reveal lies to her, as it was said those that Four-Eyes wore did. Balbulus's lettering was not much clearer than when seen through the beryl she normally used, but at least the world wasn't red any more, and she could see better with both eyes at once, even though she couldn't wear the glasses for too long without straining her eyes. 'You read too much!' Balbulus was always saying, but what was she to do? Without words she would die, she'd simply die, even faster than her mother had done.

The seal of the letter was a unicorn's head. Whose seal was that?

Violante broke it – and instinctively glanced at the door when she realized who had written to her. Brianna followed her glance. She had lived in this castle long enough to know that the walls and doors had ears, but fortunately written words made no sound. Nonetheless, Violante felt as if she could hear the Bluejay's voice as she read – and she understood exactly

what he was telling her, even if he had hidden his real words behind the written ones with great skill.

The written words spoke of the children and how the Bluejay was giving himself up in exchange for their freedom. They promised her father that the White Book would be cured if the Piper let the children go. But the hidden words said something else, something that only she could read between the lines. They said that at last the Bluejay was ready to strike the bargain she had offered him beside Cosimo's coffin.

He would help her to kill her father.

We can do it easily together.

Could they really? She lowered the letter. What had she been thinking when she made that promise?

She sensed Brianna's eyes on her, and abruptly turned her back to the girl. *Think, Violante!* She pictured what would happen, step by step, image by image, as if leafing through one of Balbulus's books.

Her father would come to Ombra as soon as the Bluejay had given himself up. That much was certain. After all, he still hoped that the man who had bound the White Book for him could cure its ills. And as he trusted no one else with the Book, he would have to bring it to the Bluejay himself. Of course, her father would come with the intention of killing the Jay. He was desperate, half crazed with what the rotting pages were doing to him, and even on the journey he would be thinking how to put his enemy to death in the most painful possible way. But first he must hand the book over to that enemy. And as soon as the Bluejay had the White Book in his hands it would all depend on her. How much time does it take to write three words? She must gain him that time. Just three words, a few seconds when he was unobserved, a pen and some ink, and then not the Bluejay but her father would die – and Ombra would be hers.

Violante felt her breath coming fast, her own blood roaring in her ears. Yes, it could work. But it was a dangerous plan, and far more dangerous for the Bluejay than for her. Nonsense, it *will* work, said her reason, her cool reason, but her heart was beating so fast that she felt dizzy. Once he's in the castle, her reason kept asking, how are you going to protect him? What about the Piper and the Milksop?

'Your Highness?'

Brianna's voice sounded different. As if something in her had broken. Good! I hope she sleeps badly, thought Violante. I hope her beauty fades while she's on her knees scrubbing floors. But when she turned and looked at Brianna, all she wanted was to hold her close and laugh with her again, the way they used to laugh.

'There's something else I'm to tell you.' Brianna didn't lower her eyes when she looked at Violante. She was still as proud as ever. 'These herbs will taste very bitter. They will help only if you use them properly. In the worst case, they can even be deadly. It's all up to you.'

As if she had to have that explained to her! But Brianna was still looking at her. Protect him, said her eyes. If you don't, then all is lost!

Violante stood up straight as a ramrod.

'I understand you very well!' she said brusquely. 'I am sure that the children will be very much better in three days' time. Their troubles will be over, and I'll use the herbs with all the necessary care. Take that message back. And now go. Tullio will escort you back to the gates.'

Brianna sank into another curtsy. 'Thank you. I know they'll be in the best of hands with you.' She rose, hesitantly. 'I know you have plenty of maids,' she added quietly, 'but if you ever want my company again, please send for me! I miss you.' She uttered the last words so softly that Violante could hardly hear them.

I miss you too. The words were on the tip of Violante's tongue, but she didn't let them pass her lips. Be quiet, heart, you stupid forgetful thing.

'Thank you,' she said. 'But I don't feel like hearing songs at present.'

'No. Of course not.' Brianna turned as pale as when Violante had hit her, after she had been with Cosimo and then lied to Violante about it. 'But who's reading to you? Who's playing with Jacopo?'

'I'm reading to myself.' Violante was proud of the cold rejection in her voice, although her heart felt so differently. 'As for Jacopo, I don't see much of him. He goes around wearing a tin nose that he had the smith make him, he sits on the Piper's knee and tells everyone he'd never have been stupid enough to let Sootbird entice *him* into the marketplace.'

Brianna put her hand to her throat. She really did wear a coin there. 'Do you sometimes see him too?'

'See who?'

'Cosimo. I see him every night in my dreams. And in the day I sometimes feel as if he were standing behind me.'

Stupid creature. In love with a dead man. What did she still love about him? His beauty was food for worms now, and what else was there in Cosimo for anyone to love? No, Violante had buried her love with him. It had gone away like the silly happiness you feel after a jug of wine.

'Would you like to go down to the vault?' Violante couldn't believe that her mouth had uttered those words.

Brianna was looking at her incredulously.

'Tullio will take you down. But don't expect too much – you'll find no one but the dead there. Tell me, Brianna,' she added (ugly Violante, cruel Violante), 'were you disappointed when the Bluejay brought your father and not Cosimo back from the dead?'

Brianna bent her head. Violante had never been able to find out whether she loved her father or not. 'I would very much like to go down to the vault,' she said quietly. 'If you'll allow me.'

Violante nodded to Tullio, and he took Brianna's hand.

'Three more days and everything will be all right,' said Violante, when Brianna was at the door. 'Injustice is not immortal. It can't be!'

Brianna nodded, as abstractedly as if she hadn't been listening. 'Send for me,' she said again.

Then she was gone, and Violante was already missing her as the door closed. So? she thought. Is there any feeling you understand better? Losing people and missing them – that's what your life consists of.

She folded up the Bluejay's letter and went over to the tapestry that had hung in her bedchamber since she first slept there at the age of seven. It showed a unicorn hunt, woven in a time when unicorns had been creatures of fantasy and were not carried dead through Ombra after a hunt. But even the unicorns of fantasy had had to die. Innocence doesn't live long in any world. Ever since Violante had met the Bluejay the unicorn had reminded her of him. She had seen the same innocence in his face.

How are you going to protect him, Violante? How?

Wasn't it the same in all stories? Women didn't protect the unicorns. They brought them to their death.

The guards at her door looked tired, but they hastily straightened their backs when she came out. Child soldiers. They both had small siblings down in the dungeon.

'Wake the Piper!' she told them. 'Tell him I have important news for my father.'

Her father. The word never failed to take effect, but none tasted more unpleasant to her. Just six letters, and she felt small

and weak and so ugly that people avoided looking at her. She remembered her seventh birthday only too well. It was the only day when her father had obviously been happy to have such an unattractive child. 'A good revenge!' he had told her mother. 'Giving my ugliest daughter to my enemy's handsome son for his wife.'

Father.

When would there be no one she had to call father any more?

She pressed the Bluejay's letter to her heart.

Soon.

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34

Burnt Words

Time seemed to have just gone, in big clumps, or all the day was happening at once, or something, I was wondering so hard about what was to come, I was watching so hard the differences from our normal days. I wished I had more time to think, before she went right down, all the way down; my mind was going breathless, trying to get all its thinking done.

Margo Lanagan,
Black Juice

They were setting off at sunrise. The Piper had accepted Mo's conditions: the children of Ombra would be set free as soon as the Bluejay kept his promise and handed himself over to the Adderhead's daughter. Some of the robbers were going to disguise themselves as women and wait outside the castle with

the mothers, and Dustfinger would accompany Mo to Ombra as a fiery warning to the Piper. But the Bluejay would ride into the castle alone.

Don't call him that, Meggie, she told herself.

There were only a few hours now until dawn. The Black Prince was sitting by the fire, wide awake, with Battista and Dustfinger, who didn't appear to need any sleep at all now that he was back from the dead. Farid was sitting beside him, of course, and Roxane. But Dustfinger's daughter had moved into Ombra Castle. Violante had taken Brianna back on the morning when the Piper had announced his agreement with the Bluejay.

Mo wasn't sitting by the fire with them. He had gone to lie down and get some sleep, and Resa was with him. How could he sleep tonight? The Strong Man was sitting outside the tent as if he must at least keep watch over the Bluejay.

'You should sleep too, Meggie,' Mo had told her when he saw her sitting a little way from the others under the trees, but Meggie had only shaken her head. It was rainy, and her clothes were as damp and chilly as her hair, but it wasn't much better inside the tents, and she didn't want to lie there with the rain telling her how the Piper would greet her father.

'Meggie?' Doria sat down in the wet grass beside her. His hair was wavy from the rain. 'Are you riding to Ombra too?'

She nodded. Farid glanced at them.

'I'll steal into the castle as soon as your father has ridden through the door, I promise you,' said Doria. 'And Dustfinger will stay near the castle too. We'll protect him.'

'What are you saying?' Meggie's voice sounded sharper than she had intended. 'You can't protect him, not just the two of you! The Piper will kill him. Are you thinking, she's only a girl, tell her lies to comfort her? I was with my father in the Castle of Night. I've faced the Adderhead. They'll kill him!'

Doria did not reply. He stayed silent for a long time, and she felt sorry she'd snapped at him like that. She wanted to say so, but she too remained silent, her head bent so that he wouldn't see the tears she'd been holding back for hours. What he'd said had started them flowing. And now he'd be thinking, she's a girl, she cries.

She felt Doria's hand on her hair. He was stroking it as gently as if to wipe away the rain. 'He won't kill him,' he whispered to her. 'The Piper is far too frightened of the Adderhead for that!'

'But he hates my father! Hate is sometimes stronger than fear! And if the Piper doesn't kill him, then the Milksop will do it, or the Adderhead himself. He'll never get out of that castle alive, never!'

How her hands were shaking – as if all her fear was in her fingers. But Doria clasped them so firmly in his own hands that they couldn't shake any more. He had strong hands, although his fingers weren't much longer than her own. Farid's hands were slender by comparison.

'Farid says you saved your father once with words when he was wounded. He says you did it just with words.'

Yes, but she had no words this time.

Words ...

'What is it?' Doria let go of her hands and looked at her with a question in his eyes. Farid was still watching them, but Meggie ignored him. She planted a kiss on Doria's cheek. 'Thank you!' she said, quickly getting to her feet.

Of course he didn't understand what she was thanking him for. Words. The words that Orpheus had written! How could she have forgotten them?

She ran through the wet grass to the tent where her parents were sleeping. Mo will be terribly angry, she thought, but he'll live! Hadn't she read what would happen next into this story more than once already? It was time to do it again, even if that

meant it wouldn't end as Mo wanted. The Black Prince would just have to tell the rest of it. He'd find a way to make it turn out well, even without the Bluejay's aid. For the Bluejay must leave – before her father died with him.

The Strong Man had nodded off. His head had sunk on to his chest, and he was snoring slightly as Meggie crept past him.

Her mother was awake. She had been crying.

'I need to talk to you!' Meggie whispered to her. 'Please!'

Mo was fast asleep. Resa cast a glance at his sleeping face and then followed Meggie outside. They still weren't speaking to each other very much. Meggie found it impossible to forget that night among the graves. Yet now she was about to do exactly what her mother had intended when she rode to Ombra in secret.

'If it's about tomorrow,' said Resa, taking her hand, 'don't tell anyone, but I'm going to Ombra with them, even though your father doesn't want me to. I want at least to be near him when he rides into the castle ...'

'He's not going to ride into the castle.'

Rain was still falling through the fading leaves as if the trees were shedding tears, and Meggie longed for Elinor's garden. The rain sounded so peaceful there. Here it whispered of nothing but death and danger. 'I'm going to read the words.'

Dustfinger turned, and for a moment Meggie was afraid he could see what she planned to do in her face and tell Mo, but he turned away again and kissed Roxane's black hair.

'What words?' Resa looked at her blankly.

'The words Orpheus wrote for you!' The words for which Mo almost died, she wanted to add. Now they would save his life.

Resa looked back at the tent where Mo was sleeping. 'I don't have them any more,' she said. 'I burnt them when your father didn't come back.'

No.

‘They couldn’t have protected him anyway!’

A glass man appeared among dripping wet nettles, pale green, like many of the glass men who still lived in the forest. He sneezed and scurried away in alarm at the sight of Meggie and Resa.

Her mother placed her hands on Meggie’s shoulders. ‘He didn’t want to come with us, Meggie! He told Orpheus to write something just for us. Your father wants to stay, even now, and neither you nor I can force him to go back. He’d never forgive us.’

Resa tried to stroke her daughter’s wet hair back from her forehead, but Meggie pushed her hand away. It couldn’t be true. She was lying. Mo would never stay here without his wife and daughter ... would he?

‘And perhaps he’s right. Perhaps everything will turn out well,’ said her mother quietly. ‘And one day we’ll be telling Elinor how your father saved the children of Ombra.’ Resa’s voice didn’t sound half as hopeful as her words. ‘Bluejay,’ she whispered as she glanced at the men sitting by the fire. ‘The first present your father ever gave me was a bookmark made of bluejay feathers. Isn’t that strange?’

Meggie didn’t answer. And Resa caressed her wet face once more and went back to the tent.

Burnt.

It was still dark, but a few freezing fairies were already beginning to dance. Mo would soon be setting out, and there was nothing that could stop him. Nothing.

Battista was sitting alone between the roots of the great oak which the guards climbed at night. You could see almost as far as Ombra from its highest branches. He was making a new mask. Meggie saw the blue feathers in his lap and knew who would soon be wearing it.

‘Battista?’ Meggie knelt down beside him. The ground was cold and damp, but the moss among the roots was as soft as the cushions in Elinor’s house.

He looked at her, his eyes full of sympathy. His glance was even more comforting than Doria’s hands. ‘Ah, the Bluejay’s daughter,’ he said in the voice that the Strong Man called Battista’s marketplace voice. ‘What a beautiful sight at such a dark hour. I’ve sewn your father a good place to hide a sharp knife. Can a poor strolling player ease your heart in some other way?’

Meggie tried to smile. She was so tired of tears. ‘Can you sing me a song? One of the songs the Inkweaver wrote about the Bluejay? It has to be one of those! The best you know. A song full of power and ...’

‘Hope?’ Battista smiled. ‘Of course. I could fancy such a song too. Even if,’ he added, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial tone, ‘even if your father doesn’t like having them sung when he’s around. But I’ll sing it so quietly that my voice won’t wake him. Let’s see, which is the right song for this dark night?’ He thoughtfully stroked the mask on his lap. It was nearly finished. ‘Yes,’ he whispered at last. ‘I know!’ And he began singing in a soft voice:

*Piper, beware, your end is near,
The Adder’s power dwindles.
He writhes, he goes in mortal fear,
Nothing his strength rekindles.
Though you seek the Jay in country and town,
No sword can wound him, no hound run him down,
And when you think you’ll succeed in your quest,
You find that the bird has flown the nest.*

Yes, those were the right words. Meggie got Battista to sing them to her until she could remember every line. Then she sat down a little way from everyone else, under the trees, where the firelight still kept the darkness of night away, and wrote the song down in the notebook that Mo had bound for her long ago, in that other life, after a quarrel that now seemed so strange. *Meggie, you'll lose yourself in the Inkworld.* Didn't he say something like that to her at the time? And now he himself didn't want to leave this world; he wanted to stay here alone, without her.

Words written down in black and white. It was a long, long time since she'd read anything aloud. When did she last do it? When she brought Orpheus here? Don't think about that, Meggie. Think of the other times, the Castle of Night, the words that helped when Mo was wounded ...

Piper, beware, your end is near.

Yes, she could still do it. Meggie felt the words gathering weight on her tongue as she wove them into her surroundings ...

The Adder's power dwindles.

He writhes, he goes in mortal fear,

Nothing his strength rekindles ...

She sent the words to find Mo in his sleep, made him armour out of them, armour that even the Piper and his dark master couldn't pierce ...

Though you seek the Jay in country and town,

No sword can wound him, no hound run him down,

And when you think you'll succeed in your quest,

You find that the bird has flown the nest.

Meggie read Fenoglio's song over and over again. Until the sun rose.



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35

The Next Verse

Through this toilsome world, alas!
Once and only once I pass;
If a kindness I may show;
If a good deed I may do
To a suffering fellow man,
Let me do it while I can.
No delay, for it is plain
I shall not pass this way again.

Anonymous,
I Shall Not Pass This Way Again

It was a cold day, misty and colourless, and Ombra looked as if it were wearing a grey dress. The women had gone to the

castle at daybreak, silent as the day itself, and now they were standing there and waiting without a word.

There was not a cheerful sound to be heard, no laughter, no weeping. It was simply quiet. Resa stood with the mothers as if she too were waiting for a child to come back, instead of expecting to lose her husband. Did the baby she was carrying under her aching heart sense its mother's despair this morning? Suppose it never saw its father? Had that thought ever made Mo hesitate? She hadn't asked him.

Meggie stood beside her, her face under such rigid control that it frightened Resa more than if she had been crying. Doria was with her, dressed as a maidservant with a headscarf over his brown hair, because boys of his age were conspicuous in Ombra now. His brother hadn't come with them. All Battista's skill with disguises couldn't have made the Strong Man look like a woman, but more than a dozen robbers had been able to steal past the guards at the gate with their faces shaved, wearing stolen dresses and with scarves over their heads. Even Resa didn't notice them among all the women. The Black Prince had told his men to go to the mothers as soon as their children were free and persuade them to bring their sons and daughters to the forest the next day, so that the robbers could hide them in case the Piper broke his word and came to take them away to the mines after all. For who was going to ransom them a second time, once the Bluejay was caught?

The Black Prince himself hadn't come to Ombra with them. His dark face would have attracted far too much attention. Snapper, who had opposed Mo's plan to the last, had also stayed in the camp, like Roxane and Farid. Of course Farid had wanted to go with the others, but Dustfinger had forbidden it, and after what had happened on Mount Adder Farid did not go against such orders.

Resa glanced at Meggie again. She knew that if she could find any comfort today it would be only in her daughter. Meggie was grown-up now, Resa realized that this morning. I don't

need anyone, said her face. It said so to Doria, who was still standing beside her, to her mother, and perhaps above all to her father.

A whisper ran through the waiting crowd. Reinforcements joined the guards on the castle walls, and Violante appeared behind the battlements above the gates, so pale that it looked as if the rumours about her were true: the Adderhead's daughter, they said, almost never left her dead husband's castle. Resa had never seen Her Ugliness before. But of course she had heard of the mark that had disfigured her face like a brand since birth, and then faded on Cosimo's return. It was hardly visible now, but Resa noticed that Violante's hand instinctively went to her cheek when she saw all the women staring up at her. Her Ugliness. Had they shouted that name up to her in the past, whenever she appeared on the battlements? Some of the women were whispering it even now, but Violante was neither ugly nor beautiful. She held herself very erect, as if to make up for her lack of height, but between the two men who stationed themselves beside her she looked so young and vulnerable that Resa felt fear close like a claw around her heart. The Piper and the Milksop. Violante looked like a child between the two of them. How was this girl to protect Mo?

A boy pushed his way in beside the silver-nosed minstrel. He wore a metal nose too, but there was a real flesh-and-blood nose under it. This must be Jacopo, Violante's son. Mo had mentioned him. He obviously thought more of the Piper's company than his mother's, judging by the admiring looks he gave his grandfather's herald.

Resa felt dizzy when she saw the man with the silver nose standing up there so proudly. No, Violante couldn't protect Mo from him. He commanded Ombra now, not she, and not the Milksop who stood looking down at his subjects as haughtily as if the mere sight of them turned his stomach. The Piper, in contrast, seemed as pleased with himself as if the day belonged

to him alone. Didn't I tell you so? his glance mocked them. I'll catch the Bluejay, and then I'll take your children all the same.

Why had she come? Why was she doing this to herself? Because she wanted to convince herself that it was all really happening, that she wasn't just reading about it?

The woman next to her reached for her arm. 'He's coming!' she whispered to Resa. There were whispers everywhere. 'He's coming! He's really coming!' Resa saw the sentries on the watchtowers by the gate giving the Piper a signal. Of course he was coming. What had they expected? Did they think he wouldn't keep his word?

The Milksop adjusted his wig and smiled at the Piper as triumphantly as if he personally, single-handed, had driven into his path the quarry he'd been hunting so long, but the Piper ignored him. He was staring at the street leading up from the city gate, his eyes as grey as the sky above him and just as cold. Resa remembered those eyes only too well. She also remembered the smile that now stole over his thin lips. He had smiled in just the same way in Capricorn's fortress whenever there was going to be an execution.

And then she saw Mo.

There he was all of a sudden, where the street ended, mounted on the black horse that the Prince had given him after he had to leave his own behind at Ombra Castle. The mask that Battista had made him was dangling around his neck. He didn't need the mask any more to be the Bluejay. The bookbinder and the robber had the same face now.

Dustfinger was behind him. He was riding the horse that had carried Roxane to the Castle of Night, bringing Fenoglio's words to save them. But there were no words for what was going to happen now. Or were there? Was the terrible silence weighing down on them all made of words?

No, Resa, she thought. This story has no author any more. What happens now is written by the Bluejay in his own flesh

and blood – and for a moment, as he rode out of the alley, even she could call Mo by no other name. The Bluejay. How hesitantly the women made way for him, as if they themselves suddenly thought the price he was going to pay for their children too high. But at last they formed a lane just wide enough for the two riders, and every hoof beat made Resa clutch the folds of her dress more tightly.

What's the matter? Didn't you always love to read such stories? she thought bitterly, her heart in her mouth. Wouldn't you have liked this story too? The robber setting the children free by giving himself up to his enemies ... admit it, you'd have loved every word! Except that the heroes of such stories don't usually have wives. Or daughters.

Meggie was still standing there as if none of this was anything to do with her, but her eyes were fixed on her father as if her gaze could protect him. Mo rode past, so close that Resa could have touched his horse. Her knees felt weak. She reached for the arm of the nearest woman, feeling so faint and ill that she could hardly keep on her feet. Look at him, Resa, she told herself. That's what you're here for, to see him once again, aren't you?

Did he feel fear? The fear that had made him wake abruptly from sleep on so many nights, his fear of bars and fetters? *Resa, leave the door open.*

Dustfinger is with him, she thought, trying to comfort herself. Dustfinger is right behind him, and he left all his own fears behind with Death. But Dustfinger will stay with him only as far as the castle gates, whispered her heart, and the Piper is waiting beyond them. She felt her knees giving way again until suddenly Meggie's arm was under hers, holding it as firmly as if her daughter were the older of the two of them. Resa turned her face into Meggie's shoulder, while the women around her looked longingly at the castle gates, which were still firmly closed.

Mo reined in his horse. Dustfinger was still just behind him, his face as expressionless as only he could make it. She wasn't yet used to the sight of him without his scars. He looked so much younger. Many eyes rested on him, the Fire-Dancer whom the Bluejay had brought back from the dead.

'The Piper won't be able to touch him!' whispered the woman beside her, murmuring it like a magic spell. 'No, how can he hold the Bluejay captive if even Death couldn't do it?'

Perhaps the Piper is more murderous than Death, Resa felt like replying, but she said nothing. She held her peace and looked up at the man with the silver nose.

'So here you really are! The Bluejay, in person!' His hoarse voice carried a long way in the silence that had settled over Ombra again. 'Or do you still claim to be someone else, as you did back at the Castle of Night? How shabby you look. A dirty vagabond. I really thought you'd send someone in your place, hoping we wouldn't find him out behind the mask too soon.'

'Oh, I don't think you as stupid as that, Piper!' Mo's face was full of contempt as he looked up at the silver-nosed man. 'Although shouldn't we change your name and call you after your new trade in future? Butcher of Children, how do you like that?'

Resa had never heard such hatred in Mo's voice before. The voice that could call the dead back to life. How intently everyone was listening. And in spite of all the hate and anger in it, it still sounded so soft and warm by comparison with the Piper's.

'Call me what you like, bookbinder!' The Piper put his gloved hands on the battlements. 'I hear you know something about butchery yourself. But why did you bring the fire-eater with you? I don't remember inviting him! Where are his scars? Did he leave them with the dead?'

The battlements caught fire just where the Piper was leaning, and the flames whispered words that only Dustfinger

understood. The silver-nosed tyrant flinched back, cursing, and struck at the sparks that were settling on his fine clothes, while Jacopo ducked into safety behind his back and stared, fascinated, at the whispering fire.

‘I left certain things with the dead, Piper. And I brought certain others back.’ Dustfinger didn’t raise his voice, but the flames went out as if they were creeping away into the stone, to wait there for more words of fire. ‘I’m here to warn you not to treat your guest badly. Fire is as much his friend as mine now, and I don’t have to tell you what a powerful friend it can be.’

His face pale with anger, the Piper rubbed the soot from his gloves, but before he could reply the Milksop leant over the battlements.

‘Guest?’ he cried. ‘Do you call that the right word for a robber who already has an appointment to meet the hangman in the Castle of Night?’ His voice reminded Resa of the cackling of Roxane’s goose.

Violante pushed him aside as if he were one of her servants. How small she was.

‘The Bluejay is giving himself up as my prisoner, Governor! That was the agreement. And he is under my protection until my father comes.’ Her voice was sharp and clear, astonishingly strong for such a slight body, and for a moment Resa took heart. Perhaps she really can protect him after all, she thought, and saw the same hope on Meggie’s face.

Mo and the Piper were still staring at each other. Their hatred seemed to spin threads between the two of them, and Resa couldn’t help thinking of the knife that Battista had sewn so carefully into Mo’s clothes. She didn’t know whether it frightened or reassured her to know that he had it with him.

‘Very well! Let’s call him our guest!’ the Piper called down. ‘Which means that we ought to show him our own special brand of hospitality! After all, we’ve been waiting for him long enough.’

He raised his hand, still sooty from Dustfinger's fire, and the guards at the gate levelled their spears at Mo. Some of the women screamed. Resa thought she heard Meggie's voice too, but she herself was mute with fear. The sentries on the towers bent their crossbows.

Violante put her son aside and took a step towards the Piper. But Dustfinger simply made the fire lick around his fingers as if he were playing with an animal, and Mo drew his sword. The Piper knew very well whose weapon it had once been.

'What's the idea? Send the children out, Piper!' Mo cried, and this time his voice was so cold that Resa hardly recognized it as his. 'Send them out, or you can tell your master that the flesh will go on rotting on his bones because you couldn't bring him the Bluejay alive, only dead!'

One of the women began sobbing. Another pressed her hand to her mouth. Just behind the two of them Resa saw Minerva, Fenoglio's landlady. Of course, her children were among the captives. But Resa didn't want to think of Minerva's children, or the children of the other women. She saw nothing but the spears pointing at Mo's unarmed breast and the crossbows aimed at him from the walls.

'I'm warning you, Piper!' Once more Violante's voice allowed Resa to breathe again. 'Let the children go.'

The Milksop cast a longing glance at the crossbows. For a moment Resa was afraid he would give the order to shoot, so that he himself could lay the Bluejay at the Adderhead's feet, his own personal hunting trophy. But instead the Piper leant forward and gave the guards a signal.

'Open the gates!' he said, in a deliberately weary tone. 'Let the children out and the Bluejay in!'

Resa buried her head in her daughter's shoulder again. Meggie was still as self-controlled as her father, but she went on looking as if she feared to lose him the moment she took her eyes off him.

The gates slowly opened. They groaned and stuck until the guards pushed at them.

And then they came out. Children. So many children. They surged out as if they had been waiting behind the heavy gates for days. The little ones were in such a hurry to get outside the walls that they stumbled, but the bigger children helped them to their feet again. Fear was written on all their faces, a fear much greater than themselves. The youngest began running as soon as they saw their mothers, threw themselves into their waiting arms and burrowed their way in among the women as if into a safe hiding place. But the older children walked back to freedom slowly, almost hesitantly. They looked distrustfully at the guards they had to pass, and stopped when they saw the two men waiting on their horses outside the gate.

‘Bluejay!’ It was only a whisper, but it came from many mouths, louder and louder until the name seemed to be written on the air. ‘Bluejay, Bluejay.’ The children nudged each other, pointed to Mo – and stared in awe at the sparks surrounding Dustfinger like a swarm of tiny fairies. ‘Fire-Dancer.’

More and more children stopped in front of the two horses, surrounded their riders, touched them as if to see if the men they knew only from the songs sung secretly by their mothers at their bedsides were really flesh and blood. Mo leant down from his horse. He waved the children aside, quietly saying something to them. Then he gave Dustfinger one last glance, and turned his horse towards the open gateway.

They would not let him go.

Three children barred his way, two boys and a girl. They reached for his reins and wouldn’t let him pass into the place they had just left, to be lost behind its walls like them. More and more of them crowded around him, held him, shielding him from the spears of the guards while their mothers called for them.

‘Bluejay!’

The Piper's voice made the children turn. 'Through those gates with you now, or we'll take them all back, and hang a dozen in cages over the gateway where the ravens can eat them!'

The children didn't move. They just stared at the silver-nosed man, and the boy beside him who was younger than they were. But Mo picked up his reins again and made his way through them as carefully as if each child were his own, and the children stood there while their mothers called them, watching him ride through the huge gateway. All alone.

Mo looked over his shoulder once more before he rode past the guards, as if he knew that Resa and Meggie had followed him after all, and Resa saw the fear on his face. She was sure that Meggie had seen it too. As he rode on again the gates were already beginning to close.

'Disarm him!' Resa heard the Milksop shout, and the last thing she saw was soldiers, dozens of soldiers, dragging Mo off his horse.





36

A Surprising Visitor

God took a deep breath. Another complaint! When would Man come to him without a complaint? But he shot up his eyebrows, smiled with delight, and cried: 'Man! How are the carrots coming on?'

Ted Hughes,
The Secret of Man's Wife, from The Dreamfighter

Oh, how good it was to see Despina's little face again! Even if she looked tired and sad, scared as a bird that had fallen out of its nest. And Ivo – had he been so tall before that wretched Sootbird took to stealing children? How thin he was ... and was that blood on his tunic? 'The rats bit us,' he said, acting grown-up and fearless as he had so often since his father's death, but Fenoglio saw the fear in his childish eyes. Rats!

He just couldn't stop hugging and kissing them, he was so relieved. And so he should be. He forgave himself much, he forgave himself easily, but if his story had killed Minerva's children – he wasn't sure how he would have come to terms with that. But they were alive, and he himself had called the man who saved them into being.

'What will they do to him now?' Despina freed herself from his arms, her big eyes dark with worry. Damn it, that was the trouble with children – they were always asking the very questions you so carefully avoided yourself. And then they gave the very answers you didn't want to hear!

'They'll kill him,' said Ivo, and his little sister's eyes filled with tears.

How could she be crying for a stranger? She'd seen Mortimer for the first time today. It's because your songs have taught her to love him, Fenoglio, that's how. They all love him, and today will write that love in their hearts for ever. Whatever the Piper did to him, from now on the Bluejay was as immortal as the Adderhead. Indeed, he was far more reliably immortal, since the Adderhead could always be killed by three words. But words would keep Mortimer alive even if he died behind the castle walls – all the words now being whispered and sung down there in the streets would keep him alive.

Despina wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at Fenoglio in the hope that he would contradict her brother, and of course he did, for her sake and his own. 'Ivo!' he said sternly. 'What nonsense are you talking? Do you think the Bluejay didn't have a plan when he gave himself up? Do you think he's just going to the Piper like a rabbit falling into a trap?'

A smile of relief came to Despina's lips, and the shadow of a doubt appeared on Ivo's face.

'No, of course he isn't!' said Minerva, who still hadn't spoken a word since she had brought the children up to his room. 'He's a cunning fox, not a rabbit! He'll outwit them all!' And Fenoglio

heard the seed that his songs had sown begin to grow in her voice too. Hope – the Bluejay still stood for hope in the midst of all the darkness.

Minerva took the children away with her. Of course. She would be going to feed them up with everything she could still find in the house, and Fenoglio was left alone with Rosenquartz, who had been stirring the ink without a word while Fenoglio lavished kisses on Despina and Ivo.

‘Outwit them all, will he?’ he said in his reedy little voice as soon as Minerva closed the door behind her. ‘How? Do you know what I think? I think it’s all up with your fabulous robber! And he’ll have a particularly nasty execution, that’s what! I can only hope it will be in the Castle of Night. No one ever stops to think what all those screams of agony do to a glass man’s poor head.’

Heartless glassy little fellow! Fenoglio threw a cork at him, but Rosenquartz was used to such missiles and dodged it. Why had he taken on such a pessimistic glass man? Rosenquartz had his left arm in a sling. After Sootbird’s performance Fenoglio had persuaded him to go and spy on Orpheus one more time, and Orpheus’s horrible glass man really had pushed the poor creature out of the window. Luckily Rosenquartz had landed in the gutter, but Fenoglio still didn’t know if the child-catching scene had been Orpheus’s idea. No! He couldn’t possibly have written it! Orpheus could write nothing without the book, and it seemed – for Rosenquartz had discovered this much – that Dustfinger had actually stolen it from him. Anyway, the scene was much too good for that calf’s-head to have written, wasn’t it?

He’ll outwit them all ...

Fenoglio went to the window, while the glass man adjusted his sling with a reproachful sigh. Did Mortimer really have a plan? Damn it, how was he to know? Mortimer wasn’t really one of his characters, even if he was playing the part of one.

Which is extremely annoying, Fenoglio thought. Because if he *had* been one of them, presumably I'd know what's really going on behind those thrice-damned walls.

He stared darkly over the roof tops to the castle. Poor Meggie. And no doubt she'd blame him for everything again. Her mother certainly did. Fenoglio remembered Resa's pleading look only too well. *You must write us back again. You owe us that!* Yes, perhaps he really should have tried. Suppose they killed Mortimer? Wouldn't it be better for them all to go back to their world then? What would he want to do here once the Bluejay was dead? Watch the immortal Adder and the Piper tell his story?

'Of course he's here! Didn't you hear what she said? Up the stairs. Do you see any other stairs around here? For heaven's sake, Darius!'

Rosenquartz forgot his broken arm and looked at the door.

What woman's voice was that?

There was a knock, but before Fenoglio could call, 'Come in,' the door opened and a rather powerful female form entered his room so impetuously that he instinctively took a step back, knocking his head against the sloping roof. The dress she wore looked as if it had come straight from some cheap theatrical production.

'There we are! This is him, the author!' she announced, looking him up and down with such contempt that Fenoglio was aware of every hole in his tunic. I've seen this woman before, he thought.

'And what's going on here, may I ask?' She jabbed her finger into his chest as hard as if to stab him straight to his old heart. And he'd seen the thin fellow behind her as well. Of course ... wait ...

'Why is the Adderhead's flag hoisted in Ombra? Who is that frightful fellow with the silver nose? Why were they

threatening Mortimer with spears, and since when, for goodness' sake, has he gone about wearing a sword?

The bookworm. Of course! That's who she was. Elinor Loredan. Meggie had told him about her often enough. Fenoglio had last seen her through bars, stuck in one of the dog-pens in the arena where Capricorn's festivities were held. And the timid man with the owlish look was Capricorn's stammering reader! Though, with the best will in the world, Fenoglio couldn't remember his name. What were these two doing here? Were tourist visas for his story being handed out these days?

'I admit I was relieved to see Mortimer alive,' his uninvited guest went on. (Did she ever stop to get her breath back?) 'And thank goodness he seems to be sound and healthy, although I didn't like to see him riding into that castle alone at all. But where are Resa and Meggie? And what about Mortola, Basta, and that puffed-up mooncalf Orpheus?'

Good lord, the woman was just as awful as he'd imagined her! Her companion – Darius, yes, that was his name – was staring at Rosenquartz with such a captivated expression that the glass man, flattered, passed a hand over his pale pink hair.

'Quiet!' thundered Fenoglio. 'Shut up, for heaven's sake!'

It had no effect. Not the slightest. 'Something's happened to them! Admit it! Why was Mortimer alone?' Once again she jabbed him in the chest. 'I just know something's happened to Meggie and Resa, something terrible ... a giant has trodden on them, they've been impaled on spikes, they—'

'Nothing of the kind!' Fenoglio interrupted. 'They're with the Black Prince!'

'The Black Prince?' Her eyes became almost as large as her bespectacled companion's. 'Oh!'

'Yes, and if something terrible happens to anyone here it's going to be Mortimer. Which is why ...' said Fenoglio, grabbing her arm, not very gently, and dragging her to the door, '... I want to be left in peace, for heaven's sake, so that I can think!'

That really did shut her up. But not for long.

‘Something terrible?’ she asked.

Rosenquartz took his hands away from his ears.

‘What do you mean? Who writes what happens here? You do, isn’t that so?’

Oh, wonderful! Now her fat fingers were prodding at his sorest point!

‘No, definitely not!’ he told her sharply. ‘This story is now telling itself, and today Mortimer prevented it from taking a very unpleasant turn! But unfortunately that looks as if it will cost him his neck, in which case I can only advise you to take his wife and daughter and go back with them to where you came from, as fast as possible! Because you’ve obviously found a way, haven’t you?’

With these words he opened the door, but Signora Loredan simply closed it again.

‘Cost him his neck? What do you mean?’ With a jerk, she freed her arm from his grasp. (Heavens above, the woman was as strong as a hippopotamus.)

‘I mean that, very regrettably, he’s likely to be hung or beheaded or quartered, or whatever else strikes the Adderhead as the right kind of execution for the man who’s his worst enemy!’

‘His worst enemy? Mortimer?’ She was frowning incredulously – as if Fenoglio were an old fool who didn’t know what he was talking about!

‘It was him. *He* made him into a robber.’

That was Rosenquartz. The miserable traitor! He was pointing a glass finger at his master so mercilessly that Fenoglio felt like picking him up from his desk and breaking him in two at the waist.

‘It’s the songs,’ murmured Rosenquartz to their two visitors, as if he’d known them for a lifetime. ‘Obsessed by them, that’s

what he is, and Meggie's poor father has been caught up in his fine words like a fly in a spider's web!

This was too much. Fenoglio marched towards Rosenquartz, but the bookworm woman barred his way.

'Don't you dare do anything to that poor defenceless glass man!' She was glowering at him like a bulldog. Good God, what a fearsome female! 'Mortimer, a robber? He's the most peace-loving person I know.'

'Oh, really?' Fenoglio's voice rose to such a pitch that Rosenquartz put his hands over his ridiculously tiny ears again. 'Well, perhaps even the most peace-loving person gets to feel less so when he's been shot and nearly killed, parted from his wife, and locked in a dungeon for weeks on end. And none of that was my work, whatever this lying glass man may say! Far from it. But for the words I wrote, I imagine Mortimer would be dead by now.'

'Shot and nearly killed? Dungeon?' Signora Loredan cast a helpless glance at her bespectacled companion.

'This sounds like a long story, Elinor,' he said in his quiet voice. 'Maybe you should listen to it.'

But before Fenoglio could say anything in response to that, Minerva put her head round the door. 'Fenoglio,' she said, glancing briefly at his visitors. 'Despina won't give me a moment's peace. She's worried about the Bluejay, she wants you to tell her how he's going to save himself.'

This was too much. Fenoglio sighed deeply and tried to ignore Rosenquartz's snort of derision. He ought to take the glass man into the Wayless Wood and leave him there, that's what he ought to do.

'Send her to me,' he said, although he hadn't the faintest idea what to tell the little girl. What had become of the days when his head was brimming over with ideas? They were suffocated by all this misfortune, that was what had become of them!

‘The Bluejay? Didn’t the man with the silver nose call Mortimer that?’

Oh, good heavens, he’d forgotten his visitors entirely for a moment.

‘Get out of here!’ he snarled. ‘Out of my room, out of my story! There are far too many visitors here already. Go away.’

But the brazen woman sat down on the chair at his desk, folded her arms, and planted her feet on his floor as if planning to let them take root there. ‘No, I won’t. I want to hear the story,’ she said. ‘The whole story.’

This was going from bad to worse. What an unlucky day – and it wasn’t over yet.

‘Inkweaver?’ Despina was standing in the doorway, her face tear-stained. When she saw the two strangers she instinctively stepped back, but Fenoglio went over and took her little hand.

‘Minerva says you want me to tell you about the Bluejay?’

Despina nodded shyly, without taking her eyes off his visitors.

‘Well, that comes in handy.’ Fenoglio sat down on his bed and took her on his lap. ‘My two visitors here want to hear something about the Bluejay too. Suppose you and I tell them the whole story?’

Despina nodded. ‘How he outwitted the Adderhead and brought the Fire-Dancer back from the dead?’ she whispered.

‘Exactly,’ said Fenoglio, ‘and then the two of us will discover how it goes on. We’ll just weave the rest of the song. After all, I’m the Inkweaver, right?’

Despina nodded, looking at him so hopefully that his old heart felt heavy in his breast. A weaver who’s run out of threads, he thought. Or, no – the threads were there, they were all there – he just couldn’t weave them together any more.

Signora Loredan was suddenly sitting perfectly still, looking at him as expectantly as Despina. The owl-faced man was

staring at him too, as if he couldn't wait to hear the words come from his lips. Only Rosenquartz turned his back on Fenoglio and went on stirring the ink again, as if to remind him how long it was since he had last used it.

'Fenoglio!' Despina's hand caressed his wrinkled face. 'Go on, tell me!'

'Yes, go on!' said the bookworm woman. Elinor Loredan. He still hadn't asked how she came to be here. As if there weren't enough questions in this story already. And the stammerer wasn't going to be a particularly valuable addition to it either!

Despina tugged at his sleeve. Where did all the hope in her reddened eyes come from? How had that hope survived Sootbird's guile, and all the fear in the dark dungeon? Children, thought Fenoglio as he took Despina's small hand firmly in his. If anyone could ever bring back the words, he supposed it would be the children.





37

Only a Magpie

What was she, then, in the lean time,
In the year's meagre quarter?
She was bird and enchanter, was mistress
Of fire and water.

Franz Werfel,
Invocations 1918–1921

The house where Fenoglio was lodging reminded Orpheus of places where he himself had lived not so long ago: a shabby building, crooked, leaning sideways, with mouldy walls and windows offering a view only of other dilapidated houses. The rain fell inside it too, because in this world windowpanes were only for the rich! Pitiful. How he hated hiding in the darkest corner of the back yard, where spiders crawled into his velvet sleeves and chicken droppings ruined his expensive boots. But

what else could he do? Ever since Basta had killed a strolling player before her very eyes, Fenoglio's landlady went for anyone loitering in her yard with a pitchfork. And Orpheus had to know. He had to know if Fenoglio was writing again. He just hoped that useless glass man would come back before he was up to his knees in mud!

A thin chicken strutted by, and beside him Cerberus growled. Orpheus hastily held his muzzle shut. He'd been glad when Cerberus suddenly came scratching at his door, of course, but one question had immediately spoiled his pleasure – how did the dog come to be here? Was Fenoglio writing again after all? Had Dustfinger taken the book to the old man? None of it made any sense, but he had to know. Who but Fenoglio could have dreamt up the touching scene performed by the Bluejay outside the castle? How much everyone loved the bookbinder for it! Even though by now the Piper must have beaten him half to death, he had become godlike when he rode through the gates of that damn castle. The Bluejay as a noble sacrificial lamb. If that didn't sound like Fenoglio he'd eat his hat!

Naturally Orpheus had sent Oss with the glass man at first, but his bodyguard had let Fenoglio's landlady catch him. There was no dark corner where that great hulk could lurk unseen, and Ironstone hadn't even reached the stairs leading to Fenoglio's room. A chicken had chased him through the mud and a cat had almost bitten his head off – you certainly couldn't say that glass men made ideal spies, but their small size came in so handy! The same was true of fairies, of course, but they forgot the least little errand before they'd even flown out of the window – and after all, Fenoglio himself used his glass man as a spy, although he was lamentably unfit for the job.

No, Ironstone was much better at it. However, unlike Fenoglio's glass man he suffered from vertigo, which made it impossible for him to cross roof tops, and even on the ground he was so bad at finding his way that Orpheus found it better to

put him down at the foot of Fenoglio's stairs, if he wanted to be sure he wouldn't get hopelessly lost.

But where the devil was he now? Admittedly climbing those stairs was like scaling a mountain for a glass man, but all the same ... There was a goat bleating noisily in the shed behind which Orpheus was standing – it had probably caught the dog's scent – and some kind of liquid was seeping through the leather of his boots. Its smell was suspiciously appealing to Cerberus, who was snuffling around in the mud so greedily that Orpheus had to keep tugging him away from it.

Ah, here came Ironstone at last! He jumped from step to step, nimble as a mouse. Fabulous. For a glass man, he was a tough little fellow. It was to be hoped that what he'd found out was worth the ruin of those expensive boots.

Orpheus bent down to Cerberus's collar and took off the chain, which for want of a dog leash he had ordered in Smiths' Alley. Cerberus trotted over to the stairs and plucked the protesting glass man off the bottom step. Ironstone claimed that the dog's slobber brought his glass skin out in a rash, but how else was he going to get through the mud with those thin legs of his? An old woman looked out of her window as the dog trotted back to Orpheus, but luckily it wasn't Fenoglio's landlady.

'Well?' Cerberus dropped the glass man into his outstretched hands. Ugh! Dog slobber really was disgusting.

'He's not writing. Not a line!' Ironstone passed his sleeve over his moist face. 'I told you so, master! He's drunk himself silly. His fingers shake if he so much as sees a pen!'

Orpheus looked up at Fenoglio's room. Light showed underneath the door. Ironstone, who was slippery as an eel, always crawled through the broad crack underneath it.

'Are you sure?' He fastened the chain to Cerberus's collar again.

‘Absolutely sure! And he doesn’t have the book either. He has visitors, though.’

The old woman tipped a bucket of water out of her window. Always supposing it was water. Once again Cerberus was snuffling around with far too much interest.

‘Visitors? I don’t want to know about them. But whatever it looks like, I’m sure he’s writing again!’

Orpheus looked up at the dilapidated houses. A candle burnt in every window. They were burning all over Ombra. For the Bluejay. Curse him! Curse them all: Fenoglio and Mortimer, his stupid daughter – and Dustfinger. He cursed the Fire-Dancer most of all. Dustfinger had betrayed him – stolen from him, Orpheus, whose heart had been given to him for so many years, who had read him home to his own story and snatched him away from Death! What was it they called him now? The Bluejay’s fiery shadow. A shadow! It served him right. He, Orpheus, would have made him more than a shadow in this story, but that was over and done with. He had declared war on them all. He was going to write them a story that was to his own liking – just as soon as he had the book back!

A child came out of the house and ran barefoot over the muddy yard to disappear into one of the outbuildings. Time to get out of here. Orpheus mopped the dog slobber off Ironstone with a cloth, put him on his shoulder, and stole away before the child came out again. Away from this filth – not that it was much better in the streets.

‘Blank sheets, nothing but blank sheets, master!’ Ironstone whispered to him as they hurried back through the night to Orpheus’s house. ‘No more than a few sentences, and those were crossed out ... that’s all, I swear! His glass man almost spotted me today, but I managed to hide in one of his master’s boots just in time. You can’t imagine how it stank in there!’

Oh yes, he could. ‘I’ll have one of the maids soap you all over.’

‘No, no, better not. Last time the soapsuds left me belching for more than an hour, and my feet went white as milk!’

‘So? You think I’m letting a glass man who stinks of sweaty feet march all over my parchment?’

A night watchman came towards them, swaying as he walked. Why were those fellows always drunk? Orpheus pressed a few copper coins into the man’s wrinkled hand, in case he was thinking of calling a patrol. Now that the Bluejay was a prisoner in the castle, troops of soldiers were out and about in Ombra night and day.

‘How about the book? Did you really search for it thoroughly?’

Two boards in Butchers’ Alley sang the praises of fresh unicorn meat. Ridiculous. Where was anyone supposed to get that? Orpheus turned into Glaziers’ Alley, although Ironstone hated going that way.

‘Well, it wasn’t easy.’ Ironstone looked nervously at the notices advertising artificial limbs for broken glass men. ‘Like I told you, he has visitors, and with all those eyes to notice things, getting around his room was tricky! I even searched his clothes, all the same, and he nearly shut me up in his chest! But no luck. He doesn’t have the book, master, I swear he doesn’t!’

‘Death and the devil!’ Orpheus felt an almost irresistible urge to throw or break something. Ironstone knew these moods of his by now, and clung to his sleeve to be on the safe side.

Who but the old man could have the book? Even if Dustfinger had given it to Mortimer, he certainly hadn’t taken it to his dungeon with him! No, Dustfinger himself must have kept it. Orpheus felt a burning sensation in his stomach, as bad as if one of Dustfinger’s martens were sitting there gnawing his guts. He was familiar with this pain, which always attacked him when something wasn’t going as he wanted. A stomach ulcer, that was it. For sure. So? he asked himself. Mind you don’t

make it even worse, or do you want to have to go to one of the local quacks and have your blood let?

Ironstone was crouching on his shoulder, silent and depressed, probably thinking about the soapy water ahead of him. However, Cerberus was sniffing every wall he padded past. No wonder dogs liked this world – it stank to high heaven. I'd change that too, thought Orpheus. And I'd write myself a better spy, one as tiny as a spider and definitely not made of glass. But you won't be writing anything here any more, Orpheus, a voice whispered inside him, because you've lost the book!

Cursing, he quickened his pace, hauling Cerberus impatiently along with him – only to tread in cat dirt. Mud, chicken droppings, cat dirt ... his boots were ruined, and where was he going to get the silver for a new pair? His last attempt to write himself a chest of treasure on the gallows hill had been a dismal failure, producing coins as thin as silver foil.

At last. There it was in all its glory. His house. The finest house in Ombra. His heartbeat always quickened when he saw the front steps shining in the darkness, white as alabaster, and the coat of arms over the entrance that made even Orpheus himself believe he was of royal descent. No, up to now things really hadn't gone badly for him here. He had to keep reminding himself of that when he felt like smashing glass men, or wishing a plague of boils on the neck of a certain skinny Arab boy. Not to mention ungrateful fire-eaters!

Orpheus stopped suddenly. A bird was perching on the steps. It sat as if it intended to build a nest right there on the spot. It didn't fly away even when Orpheus came closer, but just stared at him with its black button-eyes. Birds – he hated them. They left their droppings everywhere. And all that fluttering, those sharp beaks, those feathers full of mites and worm eggs ...

Orpheus undid the chain from Cerberus's collar. 'Go on, catch it!'

Cerberus loved to chase birds, and now and then he even caught one. But this time he put his tail between his back legs and retreated as if a snake were wriggling there on the steps of Orpheus's house. What the devil ...?

The bird jerked its head and hopped one step lower.

Cerberus ducked, and the glass man clung uneasily to Orpheus's collar. 'It's a magpie, master!' he whispered in his ear. 'They ...' His voice almost failed him. 'They smash glass men and collect the coloured splinters for their nests! Please, master, chase it away!'

The magpie jerked its head again and stared at him. This was a strange bird, decidedly strange.

Orpheus bent and threw a stone at it. The magpie spread its wings and uttered a hoarse cry.

'Oh, master, master, it's going to smash me to pieces!' wailed Ironstone, clinging to his ear. 'Grey glass men are very rare!'

This time the magpie's cry sounded like laughter.

'You still look as stupid as ever, Orpheus.'

He knew the voice at once.

The magpie stretched its neck. It coughed as if it were choking on grain pecked up too greedily. Then it spat out some seeds on the alabaster-white steps – one, two, three seeds – and began to grow.

Cerberus cowered behind his legs, and Ironstone was trembling so pitifully that his limbs clattered like china in a picnic basket.

But the magpie went on growing. Feathers became black clothes, grey hair pinned severely back, fingers hastily counting the seeds that the bird's beak had spat out on to the steps. Mortola looked older than Orpheus remembered her, much older. Her shoulders were hunched, even when she stood up. Her fingers curled over like the claws of a bird, her face was gaunt under the high cheekbones, and her skin was the colour

of yellowed parchment. But her eyes were still piercing, and made Orpheus bow his head like a boy being scolded.

‘How – how do you do that?’ he stammered. ‘Fenoglio’s book says nothing about shape-shifters! Only about Night-Mares and —’

‘Fenoglio! What does he know?’ Mortola plucked a feather off her black dress. ‘Everything changes shape in this world, only most have to die first. But there are ways and means –’ and as she spoke she carefully dropped the seeds she had picked up into a leather bag – ‘for people to free themselves from their own shapes without any need for the White Women.’

‘Really?’ Orpheus immediately began wondering what kind of possibilities that opened up for this story, but Mortola didn’t give him any time to think it over.

‘You’ve settled into this world in fine style, haven’t you?’ she murmured, looking up at his house. ‘Four-Eyes, the milky-bearded merchant from across the sea, who trades in unicorns and dwarves and can read every wish of the new lord of Ombra in his eyes – well, I thought to myself, bless me if that isn’t my dear friend Orpheus! He’s obviously managed to read himself here. And you’ve even brought that nasty dog along with you.’

Cerberus bared his teeth, but Ironstone was still trembling. Glass men really were absurd creatures. And to think Fenoglio was proud of them!

‘What do you want?’ Orpheus did his best to sound cool and superior, not like the frightened little boy he became only too easily in Mortola’s presence. She still terrified him, he had to admit it.

Footsteps echoed through the night, presumably from one of the patrols sent out by the Piper to comb Ombra in case the Black Prince found some way of freeing his noble fellow-fighter after all.

‘Do you always welcome your guests outside the door?’ hissed Mortola. ‘Come on, time we went in!’

Orpheus had to bring the bronze knocker down on the wood three times before Oss opened the door. He blinked sleepily down at Mortola.

‘Is this that wardrobe-man from the other world or a new one?’ asked Mortola, pushing her way past Oss with her skirts rustling.

‘A new one,’ muttered Orpheus, whose mind was still trying to work out whether it was a good thing she was back or not. Wasn’t she supposed to be dead? But it was becoming clearer all the time that you couldn’t rely on Death in this world. Which was both reassuring and alarming.

He took Mortola, not to his study, but into the reception room. The old woman looked around as if everything in it was hers. No, very likely it wasn’t a good thing she was back. And what did she want of him? He could imagine: Mortimer. For sure she still wanted to kill him. Mortola didn’t abandon such plans easily – particularly not where her son’s murderer was concerned. In this case, however, other people looked like they were ahead of her in line.

‘So now the bookbinder really is the Bluejay!’ she remarked, as if Orpheus had spoken his thoughts out loud. ‘How many more ridiculous songs are they going to sing about him? Hailing him as their saviour ... as if we hadn’t brought him to this world in the first place! And the Adderhead, instead of hunting him down after he killed his best men on Mount Adder, blames Mortola for his escape, and for the way the flesh is rotting on his own bones. I knew at once it must be the White Book. Silvertongue is wily, but his innocent look deceives them all, and the Adder handed me, not him, over to the torturers, to get the name of the poison. I still feel the pain of it today, but I outwitted them – I made them bring me seeds and herbs, saying I’d brew them an antidote for their master. Instead I made myself wings to fly away. I listened to the wind and to the gossip in marketplaces to find the bookbinder, and I discovered he really was playing the robber, and the Black Prince had

found him a hiding place. It was a good hiding place, too, but I found it all the same.' Mortola pursed her lips while she spoke, as if she felt she still had a beak. 'How I had to control myself not to peck his eyes out when I saw him again! There's no hurry, Mortola, I thought. Being in a hurry has spoilt your fine revenge once already. Sprinkle a few poisonous berries in his food, leaving him to writhe like a worm and die slowly enough for you to enjoy your revenge. But some stupid crow pecked the berries out of his dish, and the next time I tried it the bear snapped at me with his stinking muzzle and pulled out two of my tail feathers. I tried again in the camp where the Black Prince took them – him and his daughter and that deceitful maid – but the wrong man ate from that dish. Poisonous fungi, they said, he's eaten poisonous fungi!'

Mortola laughed, and Orpheus shuddered when he saw her fingers curving as if they were still clinging to a branch. 'It's like a jinx! Nothing can kill him, neither poison nor a bullet. It's as if everything in this world were bent on protecting him – every stone, every animal, even the shadows among the trees! The Bluejay! Death itself let him go, and did a deal with him for the Fire-Dancer. Oh, very impressive! But at what price? He hasn't told even his wife the price, only Mortola knows it! No one pays any attention to the magpie in the tree, but she hears everything – what the trees whisper at night, what spiders write in damp branches with their silver threads: they say that Death will take the Bluejay and his daughter if he doesn't deliver the Adderhead's life before winter ends. And they say the Adder's own daughter plans to help the Jay to write the three words in the White Book.'

'What?' Orpheus had been only half listening. He knew Mortola's hate-filled tirades, endless and self-glorifying, but he pricked up his ears at that last remark. Violante in league with the Bluejay? Yes, it made sense. Of course! That was why Mortimer had handed himself over expressly to her! He might have known it. That paragon of virtue hadn't let himself be

made prisoner only out of nobility of mind. The noble robber was intent on murder.

Orpheus began pacing up and down, while Mortola went on uttering curses in so hoarse a voice that the words sounded hardly human.

Violante – Orpheus had offered her his services as soon as he had settled in Ombra, but she had rejected them, saying that she already had a poet ... not very nice of her.

‘Oh yes, he plans to kill the Adder! Stole into the castle like a marten into a poultry yard! Even the fairies sing about it as they do their silly dances, but only the magpie listens!’ Mortola bent double. Even her coughing sounded like a croak. She was crazy! How she looked at him, with her pupils so black and fixed that they looked more like the eyes of a bird than of a human being. Orpheus shuddered.

‘Yes, yes, I know his plans!’ she whispered. ‘And I tell myself: Mortola, let him live, hard as that is for you. Kill his wife, or even better the daughter he dotes on, and flutter up on to his shoulder when he hears the news, so that you can hear his heart breaking. But let him live until the Adderhead gives him the White Book, because the Adder too must die for all the pain he gave me. And should the Silver Prince really be stupid enough to let his worst enemy lay hands on the Book that can kill him, all the better! The magpie will be there, and not the Bluejay but Mortola will write those three words. Yes, I know what they are. And Death will take both the Bluejay and the Adderhead, and in return for such rich pickings will finally give back what that accursed bookbinder took from me with his silver tongue – my son!’

What the devil? Orpheus nearly choked on the wine he had just raised to his lips. The old witch was still dreaming of Capricorn’s return! Well, why not, since first Cosimo and then Dustfinger had come back from the dead? But he could think of

more interesting turns for this story to take than the return of Mortola's fire-raising son.

'You really believe the Adderhead will bring the White Book here?' Ah, he felt there were great things in the offing, developments full of promise. Maybe all was not lost, even if Dustfinger had stolen Fenoglio's book from him. There were other ways to play a significant part in this story. The Adderhead in Ombra! What possibilities that opened up ...

'Of course he'll come! The Adder is more of a fool than most people think.' Mortola sat down on one of the chairs that stood ready for Orpheus's distinguished clients. The wind blew through the unglazed windows and made the candles flicker. Shadows danced like black birds on the whitewashed walls.

'So will the Silver Prince let the bookbinder outwit him for the second time?' Orpheus himself was surprised by the hatred in his voice. To his astonishment, he realized that he now wished for Mortimer's death almost as passionately as Mortola. 'Even Dustfinger runs after him these days!' he uttered. 'Obviously Death has made him forget what that hero once did to him!' He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes, as if he could wipe away the memory of Dustfinger's cold face. Yes, that was the only reason why Dustfinger had turned against him! Because Mortimer had bewitched him with his accursed voice. He bewitched them all. It was to be hoped that the Piper would cut his tongue out before they quartered him. He wanted to watch as the Milksop's hounds tore him to pieces, as the Piper sliced up his skin and his noble heart. Oh, if only he could have written *that* song about the Bluejay!

Mortola's coughing brought Orpheus back from his bloodthirsty dreams.

'It's only too easy to swallow these seeds!' she gasped, bent double in the chair, her hands clutching the arms like claws. 'You have to put them under your tongue, but they're slippery little things, and if too many of them go astray and down to

your stomach, the bird sometimes comes back when you haven't summoned it.' She jerked her head like the magpie, opened her mouth as if it were a beak and pressed her fingers to her pale lips.

'Listen!' she managed to say as the fit shook her again. 'I want you to go to the castle as soon as the Adderhead reaches Ombra, and warn him against his daughter! Tell him to ask Balbulus the illuminator how many books about the Bluejay Violante has ordered from him. Convince him that his daughter is obsessed with his worst enemy and will do all in her power to save him. Tell him in the finest words you can think up. Use your voice, the way Silvertongue will try to use his. You're very keen on boasting that your voice is more impressive than Mortimer's! Prove it!'

Mortola retched – and spat another seed out into the palm of her hand.

She was clever, even if she was totally crazy, and it was surely best to let her believe she could go on acting as if she were his mistress, although all that retching made him feel so unwell he could almost have spat out his own wine. Orpheus brushed a little dust off his elaborately embroidered sleeves. His clothes, his house, all the maids ... how could the old woman be blind enough to think he'd ever serve her again? As if he'd come into this world to carry out other people's plans! No, here he served only himself. So he had sworn.

'It doesn't sound a bad idea.' Orpheus was taking great pains to keep his tone of voice as deferential as usual. 'But what about all the Bluejay's noble friends? He won't be hoping for support from Violante alone. What about the Black Prince?' And Dustfinger, he added silently, but he did not speak the name. He was going to take his own revenge on Dustfinger.

'The Black Prince, yes. Another high-minded idiot. My son had trouble with him from time to time himself.' Mortola put the seed she had spat out away with the others. 'I'll take care of

him. Him and Silvertongue's daughter. That girl's almost as dangerous as her father.'

'Nonsense!' Orpheus poured himself more wine. Wine made him braver.

Mortola inspected him scornfully. Yes, she obviously still thought him a subservient fool. All the better. She rubbed her thin arms, shuddering as if the feathers were trying to pierce through her skin again.

'What about the old man? The one who, they say, wrote Silvertongue's daughter the words I took from her in the Castle of Night? Is he still writing foolhardy recklessness into the Bluejay's heart?'

'No, Fenoglio isn't writing any more. All the same, I'd have no objection if you killed him. Far from it – he's a terrible know-all.'

Mortola nodded, but she didn't really seem to be listening any more. 'I must go,' she said, rising unsteadily from her chair. 'Your house is as musty as a dungeon.'

Oss was lying outside the door when Mortola opened it. 'So this is your bodyguard?' she asked. 'You don't seem to have many enemies.'

Orpheus slept poorly that night. He dreamt of birds, hundreds of birds, but when dawn came and Ombra emerged from the shadows of night like a pale fruit, he went to the window of his bedroom full of new confidence.

'Good morning to you, Bluejay!' he said under his breath, eyes turned to the towers of the castle. 'I hope you passed a sleepless night! I dare say you still think the roles in this story have been cast by now, but you've played its hero long enough. Curtain up, Act Two: enter Orpheus. In what part? The part of the villain, of course. Isn't that always the best role in a play?'



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38

A Greeting to the Piper

There was a smell of Time in the air tonight. [...] What did Time smell like? Like dust and clocks and people. And if you wondered what Time sounded like, it sounded like water running in a dark cave and voices crying and dirt dropping down upon hollow box-lids, and rain.

Ray Bradbury,
The Martian Chronicles

Farid wasn't with the party when the Bluejay rode to Ombra Castle. 'You're staying in the camp.' Dustfinger didn't have to say any more to make Farid worry about causing his death again, and the fear was like a hand clutching his throat. The Strong Man waited among the empty tents with him, because the Black Prince refused to believe that he could pass

for a woman. They sat there for many hours, but when Meggie and the others at last came back Dustfinger wasn't with them, any more than the Bluejay was.

'Where is he?' The Black Prince was the only person Farid dared to ask, although his face was so grave that even the bear didn't venture near him.

'Where the Bluejay is,' replied the Prince, and when he saw Farid's look of dismay he added, 'No, not in the dungeon. I mean near him, that's all. Death has bound those two together, and nothing but death is going to part them again.'

Near him.

Farid looked at the tent where Meggie slept. He thought he could hear her crying, but he dared not go to her. She hadn't yet forgiven him for persuading her father to do that deal with Orpheus, and Doria was sitting outside her tent. He was to be found near Meggie a good deal too often for Farid's liking, but luckily he appeared to understand as little about girls as his strong brother.

The men back from Ombra were sitting around the fire, heads bent. Some of them didn't even take off the women's clothes they had been wearing, but the Black Prince gave them no time to drown their fears for the future in wine. He sent them out hunting. They would need good stocks of provisions if they were to hide the children of Ombra from the Piper: dried meat, warm furs.

But that didn't interest Farid. He no more belonged to the robbers than he had to Orpheus. He didn't even belong to Meggie. He belonged with only one person, and he had to keep away from him, for fear of bringing him to his death.

Darkness was just falling, and the robbers were still smoking meat and stretching skins between the trees, when Gwin came scurrying out of the forest. Farid thought the marten was Jink until he saw the greying muzzle. Yes, it was Gwin all right. Since Dustfinger's death he had looked at Farid like an enemy,

but tonight he nibbled his calves the way he used to when he wanted to play, and chattered until Farid followed him.

The marten was quick, too quick even for Farid, who could outrun most people, but Gwin kept stopping to wait for him with his tail twitching impatiently, leaving Farid to follow as fast as the darkness allowed, because he knew who had sent the marten.

They found Dustfinger where the castle walls became the city boundary of Ombra, and the mountainside on which the city stood rose so steeply that no more houses could stand there. Nothing but thorny bushes covered the slope, and the castle wall towered up without any windows, forbidding as a clenched fist, broken by only a few barred slits that let just enough air into the dungeons for the prisoners not to stifle to death before they were executed. No one stayed long in the castle dungeons of Ombra. Sentence was quickly passed and executions quickly carried out. Why feed someone for long if you were going to hang him anyway? It was only the Bluejay's judge who was coming from the far side of the forest specially for him. Five days, so the whisper went, it would take the Adderhead five days to reach Ombra in his black-draped coach – and no one knew whether the Bluejay would live as long as a single day after his arrival.

Dustfinger stood with his shoulders back against the wall and his head bent, as if he were listening. The deep shadows cast by the castle made him invisible to the guards pacing back and forth on the battlements.

Dustfinger turned only when Gwin bounded towards him. Farid looked anxiously up at the guards before running to him, but they weren't looking for a boy, or a man on his own. One man wouldn't be able to set the Bluejay free. No, the Milksop's soldiers were watching for the arrival of many men, men coming out of the nearby forest or using ropes to help them down the steep slope above the castle – although the Piper must

know that even the Black Prince wouldn't venture to storm Ombra Castle.

The sky above the towers shone with the dark green of Sootbird's fire. The Milksop was celebrating. The Piper had ordered all the minstrels among the strolling players to compose songs about his own cunning and the defeat of the Bluejay, but very few had obeyed. Most of them kept silent, and their silence sang another song – a song of the sadness in Ombra and the tears of the women who had their children back, but had lost their hope.

'Well, what do you think of Sootbird's fire?' Dustfinger whispered as Farid came to lean against the castle wall beside him. 'Our friend has learnt a few things, wouldn't you say?'

'He's still useless!' Farid whispered back, and Dustfinger smiled, but his face grew grave again as he looked up at the windowless walls.

'It's nearly midnight,' he said quietly. 'At this time the Piper likes to show prisoners his hospitality with fists, clubs and boots.' He laid his hands on the wall and passed them over it, as if the stones could tell him what was going on in the cells behind them. 'He's not with him yet,' he whispered. 'But it won't be long now.'

'How do you know?' Sometimes it seemed to Farid as if someone else had come back from the dead, not the man he had known.

'Well, Silvertongue, Bluejay, whatever you like to call him ...' Dustfinger whispered, 'since his voice brought me back I've known what he feels as if Death had transplanted his heart into my breast. Now, catch me a fairy, or the Piper will half kill him before sunrise. Bring me one of the rainbow-coloured kind. Orpheus has given them his own vanity, which comes in handy. You can get them to do anything for a few compliments.'

The fairy was soon found. Orpheus's fairies were all over the place, and although winter didn't make them as drowsy as

Fenoglio's blue fairies, it was child's play to pluck one from her nest at this hour of the night. She bit Farid, but he blew in her face as Dustfinger had taught him, until she was gasping for air and forgot all about biting. Dustfinger whispered something to her, and next moment the tiny thing was fluttering up to the barred slits in the wall and disappeared through one of them.

'What did you tell her?' Above them, Sootbird's venomous fire went on devouring the night. It swallowed up the sky, the stars and the moon, and the smoke hanging in the air was so acrid that Farid's eyes were streaming.

'Oh, just that I promised the Bluejay I'd send the most beautiful fairy of all to visit him in his dark dungeon. And by way of thanks she'll whisper him the news that the Adderhead will reach Ombra in five days' time, even if the moss-women pave his way here with curses, and that meanwhile we'll try to keep the Piper's mind occupied, so that he can't spend too much time beating up his prisoners.' Dustfinger clenched his left hand into a fist. 'You haven't yet asked me why I sent for you,' he said, blowing gently into the fist he had made. 'I thought you might like to see this.'

He laid his fist against the castle wall, and fiery spiders scuttled out from between his fingers. They hurried up the stones, more and more of them, as many as if they had been born there in Dustfinger's hand.

'The Piper's afraid of spiders,' he whispered. 'He fears them more than swords and knives, and if these creep into his fine clothes he may forget, just for a while, how much he enjoys beating his prisoners at night.'

Farid clenched his own fist. 'How do you make them?'

'I don't know – which, I'm afraid, means I can't teach you. Any more than I can teach you this.' Dustfinger placed his hands together. Farid heard him whispering, but he couldn't make out the words. When a fiery bluejay flew out of

Dustfinger's hands and soared into the night sky on wings of blue and white fire, he felt a pang of envy like a wasp-sting.

'Oh, show me!' he whispered. 'Please! Let me try, at least!'

Dustfinger looked at him thoughtfully. One of the guards above them was raising the alarm. The fiery spiders had reached the castle battlements. 'Death taught me the trick of it, Farid,' he said softly.

'Well? So I was dead too, like you, although not for so long!'

Dustfinger laughed. He laughed so loudly that a sentry looked down, and he quickly drew Farid back with him into the blackest shadows.

'You're right. I'd quite forgotten!' he whispered, as the guards on the wall shouted in confusion and shot arrows at the fiery jay. The arrows smouldered and went out among its feathers. 'Very well, copy me! Try this.'

Farid quickly curved his fingers, feeling the excitement he always felt when he was going to learn something new about fire. It wasn't easy to repeat the strange words that Dustfinger whispered, and Farid's heart leapt when he really did feel a fiery tingling between his fingers. Next moment spiders were swarming all over the wall from his hand too, their burning bodies hurrying up the stones like an army of sparks. He smiled proudly at Dustfinger. But when he tried the bluejay, only a few pale moths fluttered out from between his fingers.

'Don't look so disappointed!' whispered Dustfinger as he sent two more bluejays flying into the night. 'There's plenty more to learn. But we'd better hide from our silver-nosed friend now.'

Ombra Castle wore a burning coat as they made their way through the trees, and Sootbird's fire had gone out. The sky belonged to the fire conjured up by Dustfinger. The Piper sent patrols out, but Dustfinger made the flames give birth to wolves and big cats, snakes slithering out of the branches, fiery moths that flew in the faces of the men-at-arms. The forest at the foot of the castle seemed to be all aflame, but the fire did not take

hold, and Farid and his master were shadows among all the red, untouched by the fear they were spreading.

Finally the Piper had water poured from the battlements. It froze to ice in the branches of the trees, but Dustfinger's fire burnt on, shaping new creatures all the time, and died down only in the morning, like a spectre of the night. The fiery bluejays, however, went on circling in the air above Ombra, and when the Milksop sent his hounds into the forest where the flames were now extinguished, fiery hares threw them off any track they found. But Farid sat with Dustfinger in a thicket of thorn apple and brownie-thorn, feeling happiness warm his heart. It was so good to be near Dustfinger again, as he had been in the old days, during all the nights when he had watched over him or kept him from bad dreams. Now, however, there didn't seem to be anything he had to protect him from. Except yourself, Farid, he thought, and his happiness was gone like the fiery creatures that Dustfinger had conjured up to protect the Bluejay.

'What's the matter?' Dustfinger looked at him as if it wasn't only Silvertongue's thoughts he could read.

Then he took Farid's hand and blew gently into it, until a woman made of white fire rose from his fingers. 'They're not as bad as you think,' Dustfinger whispered to him, 'and if they come for me again it won't be because of you. Understand?'

'What do you mean?' Farid's heart missed a beat. 'Are they going to come for you again? Why? Soon?' The White Woman on his hand changed into a moth, fluttered away, and dissolved in the grey light of dawn.

'That depends on the Bluejay.'

'What does?'

Dustfinger placed a warning hand over his mouth and pushed the thorny tendrils aside. Soldiers had taken up positions under the window slits of the dungeons. They were staring at the forest, eyes wide with fear. Sootbird was with them. He was

examining the castle wall as if he could read in the stones how Dustfinger had set the night on fire. ‘Look at him!’ Dustfinger whispered. ‘He hates the fire, and the fire hates him.’

But Farid didn’t want to talk about Sootbird. He reached for Dustfinger’s arm. ‘They mustn’t come to take you away again! Please!’

Dustfinger looked at him. His eyes were so different since he had come back. There was no fear in them now, only the old watchfulness. ‘I’ll say it again. It all depends on the Bluejay. So help me to protect him, because he’s going to need protection. Five days and nights in the Piper’s power – that’s a long time. I think we’ll all be glad when the Adderhead finally arrives.’

Farid wanted to ask more questions, but he saw in Dustfinger’s face that he would get no further answers. ‘How about Her Ugliness? Don’t you believe she can protect him?’

‘Do you?’ Dustfinger asked back.

A fairy was struggling through the thorny undergrowth. She almost tore her wings on the branches, but finally, exhausted, she perched on Dustfinger’s knee. It was the fairy he had sent out to look for the Bluejay. She had found him, and was bringing back his thanks. Nor did she forget to mention that he had assured her that she was indeed the most beautiful fairy he had ever set eyes on.



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39

Stolen Children

when I was a child
i was a squirrel a bluejay a fox
and spoke with them in their tongues
climbed their trees dug their dens
and knew the taste
of every grass and stone
the meaning of the sun
the message of the night

Norman H. Russell,
The Message of the Rain

It was snowing, tiny icy flakes, and Meggie wondered whether her father could see the snowflakes falling from wherever he was held captive. No, she told herself, the dungeons of Ombra lie too deep under the castle, and the idea that Mo was missing

his first sight of snow in the Inkworld made her almost as sad as knowing that he was a prisoner.

Dustfinger was protecting him, as the Black Prince had so often assured her. Battista and Roxane kept saying so as well. But Meggie could think of nothing but the Piper, and how frail and young Violante had looked beside him.

The Adderhead was only two days' journey away now, so Nettle had said yesterday. Two days, and everything would be decided.

Two days.

The Strong Man drew Meggie to his side and pointed through the trees. Two women were looking for a way through the snow-covered thickets. They had a couple of boys and a girl with them. The children of Ombra had been disappearing one by one ever since the Bluejay gave himself up. Their mothers took them out into the fields, down to the river to do their laundry, into the forest to look for firewood – and came back alone. There were four places where the Prince's men waited for the children. News of their whereabouts was passed on from mouth to mouth, and there was a woman as well as a robber waiting at each of those places, so that it wouldn't be too hard for the children to let go of their mothers' hands.

Resa, Battista and Gecko were receiving them at the infirmary run by the Barn Owl. Roxane and Elfbane waited at the place where the healers gathered the bark of oak trees. Two more women met children by the river, and Meggie, with Doria and the Strong Man, waited for them in a charcoal-burner's abandoned hut not far from the road to Ombra.

The three children hesitated when they saw the Strong Man, but their mothers led them on, and when Doria caught a couple of snowflakes on his outstretched tongue the youngest, a girl of about five, began giggling.

'Suppose we just make the Piper angry again by hiding them with you?' asked the child's mother. 'Suppose he's given up any

idea of taking the children away now the Bluejay is his prisoner? It was all about the Bluejay, wasn't it?"

Meggie could have hit her for the coldness in her voice.

"Yes, and this is his daughter!" said the Strong Man, putting a protective arm around Meggie's shoulders. "So don't talk as if you didn't care what became of him! You'd never have got your child back but for her father, have you forgotten that already? But the Adderhead will still need children for his mines, and yours would be easy prey."

"That's his daughter? The witch?" The other woman drew her children close to her, but the girl looked curiously at Meggie.

"You sound like the Adder's men!" The Strong Man held Meggie more firmly, as if to ward off the words. "What's the matter with you? Do you want to know your children are safe or don't you? You can always take them back to Ombra and hope the Piper doesn't come knocking at your door!"

"But where are you taking them?" The younger woman had tears in her eyes.

"If I told you, you'd be able to give it away." The Strong Man put the smaller boy up on his shoulders as if he weighed no more than a fairy.

"Can we come too?"

"No, we can't feed so many. It will be difficult enough to fill the children's bellies."

"And how long do you mean to hide them for?" How desperate every word sounded.

"Until the Bluejay has killed the Adderhead."

The women looked at Meggie.

"How can he possibly do that?"

"He'll kill him, you wait and see," replied the Strong Man, and his voice sounded so confident that for a precious moment even Meggie forgot all her fears for Mo. But the moment passed, and

once again she felt the snow on her skin, as cold as the end of all things.

Doria put the little girl on his back and smiled at Meggie. He was tireless in his efforts to cheer her up. He brought her berries hard with frost, flowers covered with rime – the last flowers of the year – and made her forget her troubles by asking her about the world she came from. She was beginning to miss him when he wasn't near her.

The little girl cried when the women left, but Meggie stroked her hair and told her what Battista had said about the snow: many of the snowflakes, he had told her, were tiny elves who kissed your face with icy lips before melting on your warm skin. The child stared up at the whirling snow, and Meggie went on talking, letting the words comfort her too while the world around turned white, letting herself go back to the days when Mo used to tell her stories – before he was part of a story himself. It was a long time since Meggie had been able to say whether it was her story as well.

The snow did not fall for long, and left only a fine, light dusting on the cold ground. Twelve more women brought their children to the abandoned charcoal-burner's hut, their faces full of anxiety and concern, and full of doubt too. Were they doing the right thing? Some of the children didn't even look back at their mothers as the women left, others ran after them, and two cried so hard that their mothers took them away again, back to Ombra where the Piper was waiting for them like a silver spider in its web. By the time darkness fell, nineteen children stood under the trees with their powdering of snow, huddled together like a flock of goslings. The Strong Man looked like a giant beside them as he signalled to them to go with him. Doria conjured acorns out of their little noses and plucked coins from their hair when one of them started crying. The Strong Man showed them how he listened to the birds, and let three children ride on his shoulders all at once.

As for Meggie, she told them stories as darkness fell over them, stories Mo had told her so often that she thought she heard his voice with every word she spoke. They were all exhausted by the time they reached the robbers' camp. The place was teeming with children. Meggie tried to count them, but soon gave up. How were the robbers to fill so many mouths, when the Black Prince could hardly feed his own men?

What Snapper and Gecko thought of all this showed only too clearly in their faces. Nursemaids, that was the whisper going around the camp. Is this what we went into the forest for? Snapper, Gecko, Elfbane, Woodenfoot, Wayfarer, Blackbeard ... many of them were saying so. But who was the slightly-built man with the gentle face standing beside Snapper, looking around as if he had never seen his surroundings before? He looked like ... no. No, it couldn't be true. Meggie rubbed her eyes. She was obviously so tired that she was seeing ghosts. But suddenly two strong arms went around her, hugging her so hard that she gasped for air.

'Why, just look at you! You're almost as tall as me now, you shameless girl!'

Meggie turned.

Elinor.

What was happening? Had she lost her mind? Had it all been nothing but a dream, and now she was waking up? Would the trees dissolve next, would everything disappear – the robbers, the children – and she'd see Mo standing beside her bed asking if she intended to sleep right through breakfast?

Meggie pressed her face into Elinor's dress. It was velvet, and looked like a theatrical costume. Yes, she was dreaming. Definitely. But then what was still real? Wake up, Meggie! she told herself. Come on, wake up!

The slightly-built stranger standing next to Snapper smiled shyly at her as he held his twisted spectacle frame up to his eyes, and yes, it really was Darius!

Elinor hugged her again, and Meggie began to cry. She wept into Elinor's peculiar dress, shedding all the tears she had been holding back since Mo rode to Ombra Castle.

'Yes, yes, I know! It's just terrible,' said Elinor as she awkwardly stroked Meggie's hair. 'You poor thing. I've already given that scribbler fellow a piece of my mind. Conceited old fool! But you wait, your father will show that silver-nosed Fiddler a thing or two!'

'He's the Piper.' Meggie had to laugh although the tears went on running down her face. 'The Piper, Elinor!'

'Well, whatever! How's anyone supposed to remember all these strange names?' Elinor looked around her. 'That Fenoglio deserves to be hung, drawn and quartered for all this, but of course he doesn't see it that way. I'm glad we'll be able to keep an eye on him now. He refused to let Minerva come here on her own, I suppose just because he couldn't stand the thought of not having her to cook and mend for him!'

'You mean Fenoglio's here too?' Meggie wiped her tears away.

'Yes. But where's your mother? I can't find her anywhere.'

Meggie's face seemed to show that she still wasn't on good terms with Resa, but Battista came between them before Elinor could ask her about that.

'Bluejay's daughter, will you introduce me to your splendidly-dressed friend?' He bowed to Elinor. 'To what guild of the strolling players do you belong, gracious lady? Let me guess. You're an actress. Your voice would surely fill any marketplace!'

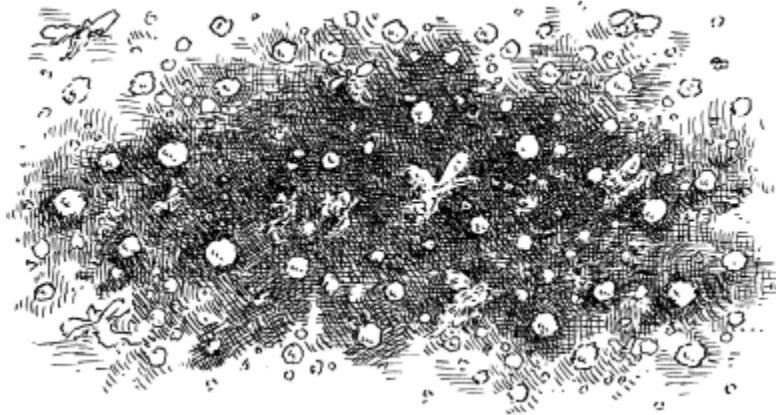
Elinor stared at him in such horror that Meggie quickly came to her aid. 'This is Elinor, Battista – my mother's aunt ...'

'Ah, one of the Bluejay's family!' Battista bowed even lower. 'Presumably that information will keep Snapper there from wringing your neck. He's trying to convince the Black Prince

that you and this stranger –’ he indicated Darius, who joined them with a shy smile – ‘are spies of the Piper’s.’

Elinor spun round so abruptly that she drove her elbow into Darius’s stomach. ‘The Black Prince?’ She blushed like a girl as she saw him and his bear standing with Snapper. ‘Oh, he’s magnificent!’ she breathed. ‘And so is his bear – the bear looks just the way I imagined him! Ah, this is all so wonderful, so incredibly wonderful!’

Meggie felt her tears drying up. She was so glad Elinor was here, so very glad indeed.





40

A New Cage

Westley closed his eyes. There was pain coming and he had to be ready for it. He had to prepare his brain, he had to get his mind controlled and safe from their efforts, so that they could not break him.

William Goldman,
The Princess Bride

This time they came earlier than on the nights before. Night was only just falling outside. Not that it was ever light in Mo's cell, but night brought a different kind of darkness, and with it came the Piper. Mo sat up as straight as he could in chains, and prepared to be kicked and struck. If only he hadn't felt so stupid, so infinitely stupid. The fool who of his own free will had stumbled into his enemies' net. Not a robber any more, not a bookbinder, only a fool.

The cells in the dungeons of Ombra were no more comfortable than the cells in the tower of the Castle of Night. In these dark holes, hardly high enough for a man to stand up, the same fear lurked as in all dungeons. Yes, the fear was back. It had been waiting for him at the gates, it had almost choked him when the Milksop's men had bound his hands.

Captured. Helpless ...

Think about the children, Mortimer! Only the memory of their faces soothed him when he cursed himself for what he had done and endured the blows and kicks that the night brought with it. Dustfinger's fire at least made the Piper leave him in peace from time to time, but it also infuriated Silvernose more and more. In his mind Mo still heard the voice of the fairy who had fluttered up on to his shoulder that first night. He still saw the fiery spiders scuttering into the Piper's velvet garments. Mo had laughed at him for the panic in his face – but he had paid for that, several times.

Two more days, Mortimer, two days and two nights. Then the Adderhead will arrive. And then what? Yes, he was a fool to hope he might yet be able to give Death and her pale daughters what they demanded.

Would Resa realize that he had also ridden to the castle for Meggie's sake when the White Women came for their daughter? Would she understand that he hadn't told her anything about it so that fear for Meggie wouldn't eat away at her own heart?

The two soldiers who entered his cell had soot on their hands and faces. They always came in pairs, but where was their silver-snouted master? Without a word, they hauled Mo to his feet. The chains were heavy and cut into his skin.

'The Piper's going to be visiting you in another cell today!' they muttered to him. 'One that your friend's fire can't find.'

They went further down, down and down, past holes from which the smell of rotting flesh rose. Once Mo thought he saw a

fiery snake creeping through the darkness, but one of his guards hit him when he turned to look at it.

The cell into which they pushed him was much larger than the one he had been kept in before. There was dried blood on the walls, and the air was both cold and musty.

The Piper kept him waiting, and when he finally arrived, followed by two more soldiers, he too had soot on his face. The men who had dragged Mo here made way respectfully for their master, but Mo saw how anxiously they looked around – as if they were waiting for Dustfinger’s fiery spiders to crawl out of the walls any minute now. Mo could sense Dustfinger searching for him. It was as if his thoughts were putting out feelers for Mo, but the dungeons in Ombra lay almost as deep as those in the Castle of Night.

Perhaps tonight he would use the knife that Battista had sewn into the hem of his shirt – although his hands hurt so much that he probably wouldn’t even be able to hold it, let alone stab with it. But it felt good to have it with him when the fear became unbearable. The fear and the hatred.

‘Your fire-eating friend is getting bolder all the time, but that won’t help you tonight, Bluejay. I’m tired of it!’ The Piper’s face was white under the soot that blackened even his silver nose. One of the soldiers hit Mo in the face. Two more days ...

The Piper looked at his soot-smeared gloves with distaste. ‘All Ombra is laughing at me. “Look at the Piper,” they whisper. “The Fire-Dancer is running rings around his men, and the Black Prince is hiding the children from him! The Bluejay will save us after all.” Well, enough of that! When I’ve finished with you tonight they won’t think so any more.’

He came so close to Mo that his nose was almost prodding his enemy’s face. ‘What about it? Don’t you want to use your wonderful voice to call for help? Call all your ragged friends, the Prince and his bear, the Fire-Dancer – or how about Violante? Her hairy servant is always on my heels, snooping,

and hardly an hour goes by without her telling me that you're no use to her father unless you're alive. But her father is nothing like as terrifying these days as he used to be. You've made sure of that yourself.'

Violante. Mo had seen her only once, when they were dragging him off his horse in the castle courtyard. How could he have been stupid enough to believe she'd be able to protect him? He was lost. And Meggie with him. Despair rose in him, such black despair that he felt sick, and the Piper smiled.

'Ah, you're afraid. I like that. I ought to write a song about it. But from now on the only songs sung will be about me – dark songs, the kind I enjoy. Very dark.'

With a foolish grin, one of the soldiers went up to Mo holding a stick studded with iron.

"‘The Bluejay will run away from them again!’ That's what they say!' The Piper took a step back. 'But you're never going to run away from anything any more. From now on you're going to crawl, Bluejay. Crawl to me.'

The two men who had brought him here seized Mo. They forced him up against the bloodstained wall, while the third man raised the iron-studded stick. The Piper stroked his silver nose.

'You'll need your hands for the Book, Bluejay. But why would the Adder mind if I break your legs? And even if he did ... as I was saying, the Adderhead's not what he used to be.'

Lost.

Oh God. Meggie, he thought. Had he ever told her such a terrible story as this? 'No, Mo, no fairy tales!' she always used to say when she was little. 'They're much too sad.' Not as sad as this one.

'What a pity my father was unable to hear your little speech for himself, Piper.' Violante did not raise her voice much, but the Piper whipped round as if she had shouted at him. The

soldier with the silly grin lowered the stick, and the others retreated, making way for the Adderhead's daughter. Violante was almost invisible in the black dress she wore. How could they call her ugly? At this moment Mo felt he had never seen a more beautiful face. He hoped the Piper didn't notice how his legs were trembling. He begrudged the silver-nosed man that satisfaction.

A small, furry face appeared beside Violante. Tullio. Had he fetched her? Her Ugliness had half a dozen of her beardless soldiers with her too. They looked so young and vulnerable compared to the Piper's men, but their young hands held crossbows, weapons to be respected even by seasoned men-at-arms.

But the Piper quickly recovered.

'What do you want here?' he snarled at Violante. 'I'm only making sure your precious prisoner doesn't fly the coop again. It's bad enough for his fiery friend to make us all a laughing stock. Your father's not going to like that one bit.'

'And you are not going to like what I'm about to do.' There was no emotion at all in Violante's voice. 'Tie them up!' she ordered her soldiers. 'Take the chains off the Bluejay and tie him up too, but so that he can still ride.'

The Piper reached for his sword, but three of Violante's young men overpowered him and dragged him down. Mo could physically feel their hatred for the man. They'd happily have killed the Piper, he saw it on their young faces, and obviously the Piper's men saw it too, for they let themselves be tied up without resisting.

'You ugly little snake!' The Piper's noseless voice sounded even stranger when he raised it. 'So the Milksop was right! You're hand in glove with that pack of robbers. What do you want? The throne of Ombra, and perhaps your father's too?'

Violante's face was as still as if Balbulus had painted it. 'I want just one thing,' she replied. 'I want to deliver the Bluejay

to my father intact, so that he can still be useful to him. And in return for that service I will indeed demand the throne of Ombra. Why not? I have ten times more right to it than the Milksop.'

The soldier who removed Mo's chains was the boy who had opened the sarcophagus for him in Cosimo's vault. 'I'm sorry!' he murmured as he tied him up. He didn't pull the rope very tight around Mo's arms, which were chafed and sore, but it still hurt, and all the time Mo never took his eyes off Violante. He could hear Snapper's hoarse voice in his ears only too clearly. *She'll sell you for the throne of Ombra.*

'Where are you taking him?' The Piper spat in the face of the soldier tying him up. 'Even if you hide him with the giants, I'll find you!'

'Oh, I've no intention of hiding him,' replied Violante with composure. 'I shall take him to my mother's castle. My father knows the way. And if he is to agree to my conditions, he must go there. I'm sure you'll tell him that.'

She'll sell you.

Violante's glance moved over Mo as indifferently as if they had never met before. The Piper kicked Mo with his bound legs as Violante's soldiers led him out of the cell, but what was a kick compared to the iron-studded stick he had been about to use?

'You're a dead man, Bluejay!' he shouted after him before one of Violante's soldiers gagged him. 'Dead!'

Not yet, Mo wanted to reply. Not yet.

A maid was waiting outside the barred door. Only when Mo passed her did he see that it was Brianna. So Violante really had taken her back. She nodded to him before following her mistress. Three guards lay unconscious in the passage. Violante stepped over them and followed the corridor down which Mo had been brought, to a narrow tunnel branching off to the left.

Tullio hurried ahead, and her soldiers followed in silence, with Mo between them.

Her mother's castle ...

Whatever Violante's intentions, he was very thankful to her that he still had the use of his legs.

The tunnel seemed endless. How did the Adderhead's daughter know so much about the secret ways around this castle?

'I read about this tunnel.' Violante turned to him as if she had heard his thoughts. Or perhaps he was thinking out loud, after all those hours alone in the dark?

'Fortunately for us, I am the only person who uses the castle library,' Violante went on. How she was looking at him – as if to determine whether he still trusted her! Oh yes, she was like her father. She loved the game of fear and power, just as the Adderhead did, the constant measuring of her strength against others, even to the point of death. So why did he still trust her all the same, in spite of his helplessness?

Two more tunnels branched off into the darkness, just as narrow as the first. When Tullio looked enquiringly at her, Violante pointed without hesitation to the one on the left. She was a strange woman, so much older than her years. Such coldness, such self-control. *Never forget whose daughter she is.* The Black Prince had so often urged Mo to remember that, and he was beginning to understand the warning better now. Violante was surrounded by the same aura of cruelty that he had felt in the company of her father, the same impatience with others, the same belief that she was cleverer than most people, better ... more important.

'Your Highness?' It was the soldier behind Mo. They all treated their mistress with great respect. 'What about your son?'

Violante did not turn as she replied. 'Jacopo stays here. He'd only give us away.' Her voice was cold. Did you have to learn from your own parents how to love your child? If so, he

supposed it was no wonder the Adderhead's daughter didn't know much about it.

Mo felt wind on his face. Air that smelt of more than just earth. The tunnel was getting wider. He heard rushing water, and as they came out into the open he saw Ombra high above him. Snow was falling from the black sky, and the river glinted beyond almost leafless bushes. Horses were waiting by the bank, guarded by a soldier, but a boy was holding a knife to the soldier's neck. Farid. Dustfinger stood beside him, sparks in his snow-dusted hair, the two martens at his feet.

When Violante's soldiers aimed their crossbows at him, he only smiled. 'Where are you taking your prisoner, Adder's daughter?' he asked. 'I'm the shadow he brought back from the dead with him, and his shadow follows him wherever he goes.'

Tullio hid behind Violante's black skirts as if he were afraid Dustfinger would send him up in flames at any moment. But Violante signalled to her soldiers to lower their crossbows. Brianna just looked at her father.

'He's not my prisoner,' said Violante. 'But I don't want my father hearing that from one of his countless spies. Hence the bonds. Shall I remove them all the same, Bluejay?'

She brought out a knife from under her cloak. Mo exchanged a glance with Dustfinger. He was glad to see him, although his heart still had to accustom itself to that feeling. The sight of Dustfinger had filled him with very different emotions for too many years. But since Death had touched them both they seemed to be made of the same flesh. And the same story. Perhaps there was only a single story anyway?

Don't trust her! said Dustfinger's glance. And Mo knew that he would read his own unspoken answer in his face. *I must.*

'I'll keep the bonds on,' he said, and Violante hid the knife among the folds of her dress again. Snowflakes clung to its black fabric like tiny feathers.

‘I am taking the Bluejay to the castle where my mother grew up,’ she said. ‘I can protect him there. Here I can’t.’

‘The Castle in the Lake?’ Dustfinger took a bag from his belt and gave it to Farid. ‘That’s a long way. A good four days’ ride on horseback.’

‘You’ve heard of the castle?’

‘Who hasn’t? But it was abandoned many years ago. Have you ever been there?’

Violante’s chin jutted so defiantly that she reminded Mo of Meggie again. ‘No, I never have, but I remember all my mother told me about it, and I’ve read everything that’s ever been written about the castle. I know it better than if I *had* been there.’

Dustfinger merely looked at her. Then he shrugged his shoulders. ‘If you say so. The Piper isn’t there – that’s one good thing, and it’s said to be easy to defend.’ He scrutinized Violante’s young soldiers as if counting their years of life. ‘Yes, very likely the Bluejay will be safer there.’

The snowflakes settling on Mo’s bound hands cooled his sore skin. He would hardly be able to use them unless he could move them more freely, at least at night. ‘And you’re sure your father will follow us to the castle?’ His voice sounded as if the despair of the dungeon still clung to it.

Violante smiled. ‘Oh yes, indeed he will. He’ll follow you anywhere. And he will bring the White Book with him.’

The White Book. The snow fell as if to paint the whole world as white as its empty pages. Winter had come. Your heartbeats are numbered, Mortimer, he told himself. And Meggie’s. Meggie’s ... how could he still love this world in spite of everything? How was it that his eyes couldn’t see enough of the distant trees, so much taller than the trees he had climbed as a boy, and his gaze sought fairies and glass men as if they’d always been a part of his world? *Remember, Mortimer, there was once a very different world*, a voice whispered inside him. But

whatever it whispered, it was wasting its time. Even his own name sounded strange and unreal, and he knew that if there had been a hand trying to close Fenoglio's book for ever, he would have stopped it.

'We have no horse for you, Fire-Dancer.' Violante's voice was hostile. She didn't like Dustfinger. Well, he had felt just the same himself for a long time, hadn't he?

Dustfinger gave such a mocking laugh that Violante just stared at him even more coldly. 'Ride on. I'll find you,' he said.

He was gone even before Violante's men brought Mo a horse, and so was Farid. There were only a few sparks still left glowing in the snow where they had been standing. Mo saw the awe on the faces of Violante's soldiers – as if they had seen a ghost. And perhaps that wasn't too far off, as a name for a man who had come back from the dead.

Still nothing was moving in the castle. No sentry raised the alarm as the first of the young soldiers rode his horse into the river. No one shouted from the battlements that the Bluejay was escaping again. Ombra was asleep, and the snow covered it with a white blanket, while Dustfinger's fiery bluejays still circled above the roof tops.





41

Pictures from the Ashes

Dumbledore shook his head. ‘Curiosity is not a sin,’ he said. ‘But we should exercise caution with our curiosity ... yes, indeed ...’

J.K. Rowling,
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

The cave that Mo and the Black Prince had found, long before Sootbird staged his show, was two hours’ journey north of Ombra on foot. That was a long way for children to walk, and winter had come to the Inkworld, with rain that turned to snow more and more often. White moths were suddenly hanging from the bare branches like leaves made of ice, and grey-feathered owls had begun hunting the fairies.

‘My own fairies sleep at this time of year,’ Fenoglio had said in self-defence, when Despina began crying because an owl had

torn two of the tiny creatures to pieces before her eyes. 'But the silly creatures Orpheus has made flutter around as if they'd never heard of winter!'

The Black Prince led them uphill and downhill, through thickets and stony debris, along such overgrown paths that they usually had to carry the smaller children. Meggie's back was soon aching, but Elinor strode on as if she couldn't wait to see as much as possible of this strange world – although she went to a great deal of trouble to conceal her delight from the creator of the whole thing. Fenoglio was walking right behind them most of the time, with Resa and Darius. The little girl Resa was carrying looked so like Meggie that, whenever Meggie herself turned round to her mother, it was like looking back to a time that had never been. Mo used to carry her when she was little, always Mo. But when she saw Resa pressing her face into the little girl's hair Meggie wished it had been different. Perhaps then Mo's absence wouldn't have hurt her quite so much.

When Resa felt sick halfway to the cave, Roxane told her not to carry any of the children any more. 'Be careful!' Meggie heard her say. 'You don't want to be telling your husband you've lost his child when he comes back, do you?'

It was obvious now that Resa was pregnant, and sometimes Meggie wanted to put her hand on the place where the child was growing, but she didn't. Tears had sprung to Darius's eyes when he heard about the pregnancy, and Elinor had cried, 'Well, everything *has* to turn out all right now,' hugging Resa so hard that she must almost have squashed the unborn child. But Meggie kept catching herself thinking: I don't need any sister. Or any brother either. I just want my father back! However, when one of the little boys she had been carrying on her back thanked her with a smacking kiss on her cheek, she felt – for the first time, and quite unexpectedly – that she was looking forward to the new baby, and she began imagining what it would be like to have a brother or sister putting small fingers into her own hand.

They were all glad that Roxane had come with them. Her son had not been among the children taken captive by the Piper and Sootbird, but she had brought Jehan along all the same. Roxane was wearing her long black hair loose again, as the minstrel women did. She smiled more often these days too, and when some of the children started crying because it was such a long way, Meggie heard her sing for the first time. She sang very quietly, but it was enough for Meggie to understand what Battista had once said: *When Roxane sings she takes all the sadness from your heart and makes music out of it.* How could she be so happy when Dustfinger wasn't with her? 'Because now she knows that he will always come back to her,' Battista said. Did Resa know the same of Mo?

Meggie didn't see the entrance to the cave until she was very close to it. Tall fir trees hid it, thorn-apple, and bushes with white down hanging from their branches, long and soft as human hair. Meggie's skin was still itching hours after she had followed Doria through the dense thickets.

The crack in the rock leading to the cavern inside was so narrow that the Strong Man had to duck his head and squeeze through it sideways, but the cave itself was tall as a church inside, and the children's voices echoing back from the rock walls were so loud that it seemed to Meggie as if they could be heard all the way to Ombra.

The Black Prince posted six guards outside. They climbed high into the tops of the surrounding trees. He sent four more men back to obliterate their tracks. Doria went as well, and sitting on his shoulder was Jasper who had attached himself to Doria now that Farid had gone. It was an almost hopeless task to hide the prints of so many small feet, and Meggie could see from the Prince's face how much he would have liked to take the children even further away, far from the Piper and the Milksop's hounds.

The Black Prince had let half a dozen women come with their children, for he knew his men well enough to realize that they

weren't much use as foster mothers. Roxane, Resa and Minerva helped the women to make the cave more comfortable, laying blankets and lengths of cloth between the rocky walls, bringing in more dry leaves so that everyone could sleep more easily, spreading furs over the leaves and piling up stones to make separate niches where the smallest children could bed down. They made a hearth to cook on, took stock of the provisions the robbers had brought – and kept straining their ears for noises outside, terrified of suddenly hearing the barking of dogs, or soldiers' voices.

'See how greedily they're stuffing their little mouths!' grunted Snapper, when the Black Prince first had food served out to the children. 'Our provisions are hardly going to last a week at this rate. And then what?'

'By then the Adderhead will be long dead,' replied the Strong Man, his tone defiant, but Snapper just laughed scornfully.

'Oh yes? And the Bluejay will kill the Piper at the same time, will he? He'll need more than three words for that. And what about the Milksop and his men-at-arms?'

Yes, what about them? No one knew the answer to that. 'Violante will throw them all out once her father's dead!' said Minerva. But Meggie still found it hard to trust Her Ugliness.

'He'll be all right, Meggie!' Elinor kept saying. 'Don't look so sad. If I get the hang of this whole story – which isn't so easy, since our good friend the author there likes making things complicated,' she added with a reproachful glance at Fenoglio, '– then they won't touch a hair of your father's head, because he has to cure that Book for the Adderhead. Which presumably he can't do, but that's another problem. Anyway, you wait and see. Everything will end well!'

If only Meggie could have believed her, as she used to believe Mo. 'It will be all right, Meggie!' That was all he had to say, and she would lay her head against his shoulder in the certain

knowledge that he would fix everything. How long ago that was. So very long ago.

The Black Prince had sent Gecko's tame crows to Ombra – to the Barn Owl and his informers in the castle – and Resa stood outside the cave for hours on end, searching the sky for black feathers. But the only bird Gecko brought into the cave on the second day was a bedraggled magpie, and in the end it was Farid, not one of the crows, who brought them news of the Bluejay.

He was shaking with cold when one of the guards took him to the Black Prince, and his face had the forlorn expression it wore every time Dustfinger had sent him away. Meggie took Elinor's hand as he stammered out his news: Violante was taking Mo to her mother's castle as her prisoner. Dustfinger would follow them. The Piper had hit and threatened Mo ... Violante had been afraid he would kill him. Resa buried her face in her hands, and Roxane put an arm around her.

'Her mother's castle? But Violante's mother is dead!' By now Elinor knew her way around Fenoglio's story better than its author himself. She moved among the robbers as if she had always been one of them, got Battista to sing her minstrel songs, asked the Strong Man to show her how to talk to the birds, and made Jasper explain how many different kinds of glass men there were. She kept tripping on the hem of her peculiar dress, she had smudges on her forehead and spiders in her hair, but Elinor looked happier than she had ever been before.

'It's the castle where her mother grew up. Dustfinger knows it.' Farid took a bag from his belt and wiped some soot off the leather. Then he looked at Meggie. 'We made spiders and wolves out of fire to protect your father!' There was no mistaking the pride in his voice.

'But all the same Violante thought he wasn't safe in the castle.' Resa's voice sounded accusing: you can't protect him, in

fact, none of you can protect him. He's on his own.

'The Castle in the Lake.' The Black Prince spoke its name as if he did not particularly like Violante's idea either. 'There are many songs about that castle.'

'Dark songs,' added Gecko. The magpie had flown to him and was perching on his shoulder. It was a skinny bird, and it stared at Meggie as if it would like to peck her eyes out.

'What kind of songs?' Resa's voice was husky with fear.

'Oh, ghost stories, that's all. Fanciful nonsense!' Fenoglio pushed past Resa. Despina was clinging to his hand. 'The Castle in the Lake was abandoned long ago, so people fill it with stories, but that's all they are.'

'How reassuring!' The glance that Elinor cast Fenoglio made his face turn red.

He was in a gloomy mood. Since their arrival at the cave he had been complaining non-stop about the cold, the crying children, or the stench of the bear. Most of the time he sat behind a wall of stones he had built in the darkest corner of the cave, quarrelling with Rosenquartz. Only Ivo and Despina could get a smile out of him – and Darius, who had joined the old man as soon as they had arrived at the cave and, as he helped Fenoglio to build his wall, started timidly asking him about the world he had created. 'Where do the giants live?' 'Do water-nymphs live longer than human beings?' 'What kind of country lies beyond the mountains?' Darius obviously asked the right questions, for Fenoglio didn't lose patience with him as he had with Orpheus.

The Castle in the Lake.

Fenoglio shook his head when Meggie went to him to find out more about the place to which Her Ugliness was taking her father. 'It wasn't among the main scenes of the story,' was all he would say, grumpily. 'One of many settings. Just scenery! Read my book if you want to know more about it – if Dustfinger ever lets it out of his hands again, that is! If you ask me, he ought

really have given it to me, although we still don't seem to be on speaking terms. After all, I wrote it, but there we are. At least Orpheus doesn't have it any more.'

The book.

In fact Dustfinger had passed *Inkheart* on long ago, but Meggie kept that knowledge to herself, for Farid had asked her to.

He had handed it over to her mother as swiftly as if Basta might emerge behind him to steal it, just as he had back in the other world. 'Dustfinger says it will be safest with you, because you know how powerful the words in it are,' he had murmured. 'The Black Prince doesn't understand that. But keep it hidden and let nobody know you have it! Orpheus mustn't get it back. Dustfinger is fairly sure, though, that he won't look for it in your hands.'

Resa had taken the book only with some reluctance, and finally she hid it in the place where she slept. Meggie's heart beat faster as she took it out from under the blanket. She hadn't held Fenoglio's book in her hands since Mortola had given it to her in Capricorn's arena to read the Shadow into being. It was a strange feeling to open it now that she was in the world it described, and for a moment Meggie feared the pages might suck in everything around her. The rocky ground where she was sitting, the blanket under which her mother slept, the white ice-moth that had lost its way in the cave, the children laughing as they ran after it ... had all that really come into existence between these covers? The book seemed so meaningless compared to the marvels it described, just a few hundred printed pages and a dozen pictures not half as good as those that Balbulus painted, all in a silvery-green linen binding. Yet it wouldn't have surprised Meggie to find her own name on the pages, or the names of her mother, Farid, or Mo – although, no, her father bore another name in this world.

Meggie had never had the chance to read Fenoglio's whole story. Where was she to begin now? Was there a picture of the Castle in the Lake? She was quickly leafing through the pages when she suddenly heard Farid's voice behind her.

'Meggie?'

She closed the book guiltily, as if every word in it was a secret. How stupid of her. This book didn't know anything about all her fears, it knew nothing of the Bluejay, nor even of Farid ...

She didn't think of him now as often as she used to. It was almost as if, with Dustfinger's return, the chapter about Farid and herself had ended, and the story was beginning again, extinguishing part of the tale it had told before with every new word.

'Dustfinger gave me something else to bring back here.' Farid glanced at the book on her lap as if it were a snake. But then he knelt down beside her and took from his belt the soot-blackened bag that his fingers had been caressing while he delivered his news to the Prince.

'He gave it to me for Roxane,' said Farid quietly, as he sprinkled a fine circle of ashes on the rocky ground. 'But you looked really upset, so ...'

He didn't finish his sentence. Instead he whispered words that only he and Dustfinger understood – and the fire suddenly licked up from the ashes as if it had been sleeping there. Farid lured it out, praised and enticed it, until it burnt with such heat that the heart of the flames became white as paper, and a picture appeared, difficult to make out at first, then more and more distinct.

Hills, densely wooded ... soldiers on a narrow path, many soldiers ... two women riding among them. Meggie recognized Brianna at once by her hair. The woman in front of her must be Her Ugliness, and there – with Dustfinger beside him – rode

Mo. Meggie instinctively put her hand out to him, but Farid held her fingers fast.

‘He has blood on his face,’ she whispered.

‘The Piper.’ Farid spoke to the flames again, and the picture spread out, showing the path turning towards mountains that Meggie had never seen before, much higher than the hills around Ombra. Snow lay on the way ahead, as it did on the slopes in the distance, and Meggie saw Mo breathing into his cold hands. He looked so strange in the fur-trimmed cloak he wore – like a character in a fairy tale. *He is a character in a fairy tale*, Meggie, a voice inside her whispered. The Bluejay ... was he still her father too? Had Mo ever looked so serious? Her Ugliness turned to him; of course it was Her Ugliness, who else? They were talking, but the fire showed only silent images.

‘You see? He’s all right. Thanks to Dustfinger.’ Farid stared into the fire with longing, as if that could take him back to Dustfinger’s side. Then he heaved a sigh and blew gently on the flames until they turned dark red as if blushing at the pet names he soothed them with.

‘Will you follow him?’

Farid shook his head. ‘Dustfinger wants me to look after Roxane.’ Meggie could sense his bitterness for herself. ‘What will *you* do?’ He looked at her with the question in his eyes.

‘What am I supposed to do?’

Whisper words, that’s all I can do, she added in her mind. All the words the minstrels sing about the Bluejay: how he calms the waves with his voice, how he is invulnerable and fast as the wind, how the fairies protect him, and the White Women watch over his sleep. Words. They were the only means she had of protecting Mo, and she whispered them day and night, in every private moment, sending them after him like the crows that the Black Prince had sent to Ombra.

The flames had gone out, and Farid was heaping up the warm ashes with his hands when a shadow fell on him. Doria stood

behind them, holding hands with two children. 'Meggie, the woman with the loud voice is looking for you.'

The robbers had many names for Elinor. Meggie couldn't help smiling, but Farid cast a none-too-friendly glance at Doria. He carefully put the ashes back in his bag, and rose to his feet. 'I'll be with Roxane,' he said, kissing Meggie on the mouth. He hadn't done that for weeks. Then he pushed past Doria and strode away without looking back once.

'He kissed her!' one of the children whispered to Doria, just loud enough for Meggie to hear. The child was a girl, and she blushed when Meggie returned her gaze, and hastily hid her face in Doria's side.

'So he did,' Doria whispered back. 'But did she kiss him back?'

'No!' said the boy on his right, sizing up Meggie as if wondering whether kissing her would be fun.

'That's a good thing, then,' said Doria. 'A very good thing.'





42

An Audience with the Adderhead

You cannot fully read a book without being alone. But through this very solitude you become intimately involved with people whom you might never have met otherwise, either because they have been dead for centuries or because they spoke languages you cannot understand. And nonetheless, they have become your closest friends, your wisest advisors, the wizards that hypnotize you, the lovers you have always dreamed of.

Antonio Munoz Molina,
The Power of the Pen

Just after midnight the Adderhead's retinue reached Ombra. Orpheus had made Oss wait under the gallows by the city gate for three nights on end, so that he would be sure to hear of the Silver Prince's arrival as soon as the Milksop did.

All was ready. The Piper had had every door and window in the castle draped with black cloth so that it would be night there for his master even during the day, and the felled trees that the Milksop intended to burn on the castle hearths lay ready in the courtyard, although everyone knew that no fire could drive away the cold that had made its way into the Adderhead's flesh and bones. The one man who could perhaps have done it had escaped from the castle dungeons, and all Ombra wondered how the Silver Prince would take that news.

Orpheus sent Oss to the castle that very night. After all, it was common knowledge that the Adderhead hardly slept at all.

'Say I have information of the utmost importance for him. Say it's about the bookbinder and his daughter.' Having little confidence in his bodyguard's intellectual capacities, he repeated the words half a dozen times, but Oss did his errand well. After just over three hours, hours spent by Orpheus pacing restlessly up and down his study, he came back with the message that the audience was granted, but only on condition Orpheus went to the castle at once, since the Adderhead must rest before he set out again.

Set out again? Aha. So he's playing his daughter's game! Orpheus thought as he hurried up the path to the castle. Very well. Then it's up to you to show him he can't win the game without your help! Involuntarily he licked his lips to keep them smooth for this great task. Never before had he spun his web around such magnificent prey. Curtain up, he whispered to himself again and again. Curtain up!

The servant who led him through the black-draped corridors to the throne-room said not a single word. It was hot and dark in the castle. Like hell, thought Orpheus. And wasn't that

suitable? Didn't people often compare the Adderhead with the devil himself? You had to hand it to Fenoglio, this was a villain of real stature. Beside the Adderhead, Capricorn had been just a cheap play-actor, an amateur – although no doubt Mortola saw it differently. But who cared what Mortola thought now?

A shudder of delight ran down Orpheus's plump shoulders. The Adderhead! Sprung from a clan that had cultivated the art of evil for generations. There was no cruel act that at least one of his ancestors hadn't committed. Cunning, the lust for power, total lack of any conscience: those were the family's outstanding characteristics. What a combination! Orpheus was excited. His hands were damp and sweating like a boy's on his first date. Again and again he ran his tongue over his teeth as if to sharpen them that way, prepare them for the right words. 'Believe me,' he heard himself saying, 'I can lay this world at your feet, I can make it into anything you like, but for that you must find me a certain book. It is even more powerful than the Book that made you immortal, far more powerful!'

Inkheart ... no, he wasn't going to think of the night he had lost it, not now, and he certainly wasn't going to think of Dustfinger!

It was no lighter in the throne-room than in the corridors. A few lost-looking candles burnt among the columns and around the throne. On Orpheus's last visit (as far as he could remember, that was when he had delivered the dwarf to the Milksop), the way to the throne had been lined by stuffed animals, bears, wolves, spotted great cats, and of course the unicorn he had written here, but they were all gone now. Even the Milksop was bright enough to realize that in view of the sparse taxes he had sent to his brother-in-law, these hunting trophies were unlikely to impress the Adderhead. Nothing but darkness filled the great hall now, making the black-clad guards between the columns almost invisible. Only their weapons glinted in the flickering light of the fire that burnt behind the throne. Orpheus went to great pains to stride past them looking

unimpressed, but unfortunately he stumbled over the hem of his coat twice, and when he finally stood in front of the throne itself, the Milksop was sitting there, and not his brother-in-law.

Orpheus felt a stab of disappointment, sharp as a knife. He quickly bowed his head to hide it, and tried to find the right things to say, flattering but not too servile. Talking to the powerful called for special skills, but he'd had practice. There had always been people more powerful than he was in his life. His father had been the first, never satisfied with his awkward son who liked books better than working in his parents' shop: those endless hours among the dusty shelves, an ever-friendly smile when he had to serve the tourists who flocked in instead of leafing through a book with hasty fingers, avidly looking for the place where he had last had to leave the world of print. Orpheus couldn't count the slaps he'd earned over his forbidden passion for reading. One every tenth page was probably about it, but the price had never seemed too high. What was a slap for ten pages of escapism, ten pages far from everything that made him unhappy, ten pages of real life instead of the monotony that other people called the real world?

'Your Grace!' Orpheus bent his head even lower. What a ridiculous sight the Milksop was under his silver-powdered wig, his scrawny neck emerging so pathetically from his heavy velvet collar. His pale face was as expressionless as ever – as if his creator had forgotten to give it eyebrows, just sketching in the eyes and lips lightly.

'You want to speak to the Adderhead?' Even the Milksop's voice was not impressive. Malicious tongues mocked it, saying he wouldn't have to change it very much to use it as a decoy call to the ducks he liked shooting out of the sky.

How that feeble fool is sweating, thought Orpheus as he smiled deferentially. Well, I expect I'd be sweating in his place. The Adderhead had come to Ombra to kill his worst enemy, only to discover instead that his herald and his brother-in-law

had let their valuable prisoner get away. Really, it was amazing that they were both still alive.

‘Yes, Your Honour. Whenever it is convenient to the Silver Prince!’ Orpheus was delighted to realize that in this empty hall his voice sounded even more effective than usual. ‘I have information for him that could be of the greatest significance.’

‘About his daughter and the Bluejay?’ The Milksop plucked at his sleeves with a deliberately bored expression. Perfumed bonehead.

‘Indeed.’ Orpheus cleared his throat. ‘As you know, I have important clients, influential friends. News comes to my ears that doesn’t even reach castles. This time it is alarming news, and I want to make sure that your brother-in-law hears of it.’

‘And what might this news be?’

Careful, Orpheus!

‘As to that, Your Grace ...’ he really was taking great pains to sound regretful, ‘I would rather tell it only to the Adderhead himself. After all, it concerns his daughter.’

‘Whom he will hardly feel like discussing at present!’ The Milksop adjusted his wig. ‘Sly, ugly creature!’ he uttered. ‘Abducts my prisoner to steal the throne of Ombra from me! Threatens to kill him if her own father doesn’t follow her into the mountains like a dog! As if it hadn’t been difficult enough to catch that puffed-up Bluejay! But why do I bother to tell you all this? I suppose because you brought me the unicorn. The best hunt of my life.’ In melancholy mood, he stared at Orpheus with eyes almost as pale as his face. ‘The more beautiful the game the greater the pleasure of killing it, don’t you agree?’

‘Words of wisdom, Your Highness, words of wisdom!’ Orpheus bowed again. The Milksop loved people to bow to him.

Glancing nervously at the guards, he now leant down to Orpheus. ‘I would so much like another unicorn!’ he whispered.

‘It was a huge success with all my friends. Do you think you can get me another? Maybe a little larger than the last one?’

Orpheus gave the Milksop a confident smile. What a talkative, empty-headed fool he was, but then – every story needed such characters. They usually died quite early on. It was to be hoped that this general rule held good for the Adderhead’s brother-in-law.

‘Naturally, Your Highness! That ought not to be any problem,’ murmured Orpheus, choosing every word with care, even though this princely fool wasn’t worth the trouble. ‘But first I must speak to the Silver Prince. Rest assured that my information really is of the utmost importance. And you,’ he added, giving the Milksop a crafty smile, ‘will receive the throne of Ombra. Get me an audience with your immortal brother-in-law and the Bluejay will meet his well-deserved end at last. Violante will be punished for her deceitfulness, and for your triumphal celebrations I’ll get you a Pegasus, which will surely impress your friends even more than the unicorn. You could hunt it with both crossbows and hawks!’

The Milksop’s pale eyes widened with delight. ‘A Pegasus!’ he breathed as he impatiently waved one of the guards over. ‘Fabulous indeed! I’ll get you your audience, but let me advise you,’ and here he lowered his voice to a whisper, ‘not to go too close to my brother-in-law. The stink coming off him has already killed two of my dogs!’

The Adderhead kept Orpheus waiting another hour. It passed as painfully slowly as few hours had before in his whole life. The Milksop asked him about other creatures that might be hunted, and Orpheus promised basilisks and six-legged lions while his mind put the right words together for the Silver Prince. Every one of them must ring true. After all, the Lord of the Castle of Night was as famous for his clever mind as for his cruelty. Orpheus had done a great deal of thinking since Mortola visited him, and he always came to the same conclusion: he could make his dreams of wealth and influence

come true only at the Adderhead's side. Even in a state of physical decay, the Silver Prince still played the leading part here. With his help, Orpheus might perhaps get back the book that had made this world such a wonderful toy before Dustfinger stole it. Not to mention the other book, the one enabling its owner to play with that toy for all eternity ...

How modest you are, Orpheus, he had whispered to himself when the idea first took shape in his mind. Two books, that's all you ask! Just two books – and one of them full of blank pages and in rather poor condition!

Ah, what a life he could lead. Orpheus the all-powerful, Orpheus the immortal, hero of the world he had loved even as a child!

'He's coming! Bow low!' The Milksop jumped up so hastily that his wig slipped down over his receding forehead, and Orpheus came out of his delightful daydreams with a start.

A reader doesn't really see the characters in a story; he feels them. Orpheus had discovered that for the first time when, aged nearly eleven, he had tried describing or drawing characters from his favourite books. As the Adderhead came towards him out of the darkness, it was exactly like the day when he first encountered him in Fenoglio's book: he felt fear and admiration, he sensed the evil that surrounded the Silver Prince like black light, and an abundance of power that made it difficult to breathe. But Orpheus had imagined the Silver Prince very much taller. And of course Fenoglio's description had said nothing about that devastated face, the pale and puffy flesh, the swollen hands. Every step the Adderhead took seemed to hurt him. His eyes were bloodshot under their heavy lids. They watered even in the sparse candlelight, and the stench given off by his bloated body made Orpheus want desperately to cover his own mouth and nose.

The Adderhead didn't deign to look at him as he walked past, breathing heavily. Only when he was sitting on the throne did

those reddened eyes turn to his visitor. A lizard's eyes, so Fenoglio had described them. Now they were inflamed slits under swollen lids, and the red jewels that the Adderhead wore in both nostrils were sunk deep, like nails driven into the white flesh.

'You want to tell me something about my daughter and the Bluejay?' He struggled for breath after every other word, but that made his voice no less menacing. 'What is it? That Violante loves power as much as I do, so she's stolen it from me? Is that what you want to tell me? If so, then say goodbye to your tongue, because I'll have it torn out. I greatly dislike having my time wasted – however much of it I now have at my disposal.'

His tongue torn out ... Orpheus gulped. Not a nice idea at all – but he still had it at the moment. Even if the stench wafting down from the throne made speaking almost impossible.

'My tongue could come in very useful to you, Your Grace,' he replied, with difficulty suppressing an urge to retch. 'But of course you're free to tear it out at any time.'

The Adderhead's mouth twisted into an unpleasant smile. Pain carved fine lines around his lips. 'What a delightful offer. I see you take me seriously. Very well, what do you have to say?'

Curtain up, Orpheus, he thought again. On you go, this is your big scene!

'Your daughter Violante,' Orpheus let the name die away for effect before he went on, 'wants more than just the throne of Ombra. She wants yours too. Which is why she is planning to kill you.'

The Milksop clutched his chest, as if giving the lie to those who claimed that he had a dead partridge there instead of a heart. However, the Adderhead merely stared at Orpheus with his inflamed eyes.

'Your tongue is in great danger,' he said. 'Violante can't kill me, have you forgotten that? No one can.'

Orpheus felt the sweat running down his nose. The fire behind the Adderhead crackled as if it were calling Dustfinger. Oh, devil take it, he was so frightened. But then wasn't he always frightened? Look him straight in the eye, Orpheus, and trust your voice!

Those eyes were terrible. They stripped the skin from his face. And the swollen fingers lay on the arms of the throne like dead flesh.

'Oh yes, she can. If the Bluejay has told her the three words.' His voice really did sound astonishingly composed. Good, Orpheus, very good.

'Ah, those three words ... so you've heard about them too. Well, you are right. She could get them out of him under torture. Although I would expect him to say nothing for a very long time ... and he could always give her the wrong words.'

'Your daughter doesn't have to torture the Bluejay. She's in league with him.'

Yes!

Orpheus saw, from the disfigured face, that such an idea really hadn't occurred to the Silver Prince yet. Ah, this game was fun. This was just the part he wanted to play. They'd soon all be sticking to his cunning tongue like flies on flypaper.

The Adderhead remained silent for an agonizingly long time.

'Interesting,' he said at last. 'Violante's mother had a weakness for strolling players. I'm sure a robber would have taken her fancy just as much. But Violante is not like her mother. She's like me, although she doesn't care to hear people say so.'

'Oh, I have no doubt of that, Your Highness!' Orpheus injected just enough deference into his voice. 'But why has the illuminator who works in this castle had to do nothing but illustrate songs about the Bluejay for over a year? Your daughter has sold her jewels to pay for paints. She's obsessed by

that robber, he dominates her mind. Ask Balbulus! Ask him how often she sits in the library staring at the pictures he's painted of the man! And ask yourself, how is it possible for the Bluejay to have escaped from this castle twice in the last few weeks?'

'I can't ask Balbulus anything.' The Adderhead's voice seemed made for this black-draped hall. 'The Piper is having him hunted out of town at this very moment. He cut his right hand off first.'

That really did silence Orpheus for a moment. His right hand. Instinctively, he touched his own writing hand. 'Why ... er ... if I may ask, Your Highness, why did he do that?' he managed in a thread of a voice.

'Why? Because my daughter thought highly of his art, and I hope the stump of his wrist will make it clear to her how very angry I am. For Balbulus will of course take refuge with her. Where else would he go?'

'Indeed. How clever of you.' Orpheus involuntarily moved his fingers as if to reassure himself that they were still there. He had run out of words; his brain was a blank sheet of paper and his tongue a dried-up pen.

'Shall I let you into a secret?' The Adderhead licked his cracked lips. 'I like what my daughter has done! I can't allow it, but it pleases me. She doesn't care for being ordered around. Neither the Piper nor my pheasant-murdering brother-in-law –' here he cast a look of disgust at the Milksop – 'has realized that. As for the Bluejay, it may well be that Violante is only pretending to him that she will protect him. She's wily. She knows as well as I do that it's easy to trick heroes. You just have to make a hero believe you're on the side of what's right and just, and he'll go trotting after you like a lamb to the slaughter. But in the end Violante will sell me her noble robber. For the crown of Ombra. And who knows ... perhaps I really will let her have it.'

The Milksop was looking straight ahead as fixedly as if he hadn't heard those last words spoken by his overlord and brother-in-law. However, the Adderhead leant back and patted his bloated thighs. 'I think your tongue is mine, Four-Eyes,' he said. 'Any last words before you're left as mute as a fish?'

The Milksop smiled unpleasantly, and Orpheus's lips began to tremble as if they already felt the pincers. No. No, this couldn't be happening. He hadn't found his way into this story just to end up a mute beggar in the streets of Ombra.

He gave the Adderhead what he hoped was an enigmatic smile and clasped his hands behind his back. Orpheus knew that this posture made him look rather imposing; he had rehearsed it often enough in front of the mirror. But now he needed words. Words that would cast ripples in this story, circling outwards like stones thrown into still water.

He lowered his voice as he began to speak again. A word weighs more heavily if it is softly uttered.

'Very well, then these are my last words, Your Highness, but rest assured that they will also be the last words you remember when the White Women come for you. I swear to you by my tongue that your daughter plans to kill you. She hates you, and you underestimate her romantic weakness for the Bluejay. She wants the throne for him, and for herself. That's the only reason why she freed him. Robbers and princes' daughters have always been a dangerous mixture.'

The words grew in the dark hall as if they had a shadow. And the Adderhead's hooded gaze rested on Orpheus as if to poison him with its own evil.

'But that's ridiculous!' The Milksop's voice made him sound like an injured child. 'Violante is little more than a girl, and an ugly one at that. She'd never dare turn against you!'

'Of course she would!' For the first time the Adderhead's voice rose, and the Milksop compressed his narrow lips in alarm. 'Violante is fearless, unlike my other daughters. Ugly,

but fearless. And very cunning ... like this man.' Once again his eyes, clouded with pain, turned to Orpheus.

'You're a viper like me, am I right? Poison runs in our veins, not blood. It consumes us too, but it is deadly only to others. It also runs in Violante's veins, so she will betray the Bluejay, whatever else she may intend at the moment.' The Adderhead laughed, but it turned into a cough. He struggled for breath, gasping as if water were filling his lungs, but when the Milksop bent over him in concern he pushed him roughly away. 'What do you want?' he spat at his brother-in-law. 'I'm immortal, remember?' And he laughed again, a wheezing, gasping laugh. Then the lizard eyes moved back to Orpheus.

'I like you, milk-faced viper. You seem much more like a member of my family than that fellow.' With an impatient gesture, he thrust the Milksop aside. 'But he has a beautiful sister, so one has to take the brother on with her. Do you have a sister as well? Or can you be of use to me in some other way?'

This is going well, thought Orpheus. Very well indeed! Now I'll soon be weaving my own thread through the fabric of this story – and what colour will I choose? Gold? Black? Maybe blood red?

'Oh,' he said, casting a weary glance at his fingernails – another effective trick, as the mirror had shown him. 'I can be useful to you in many ways. Ask your brother-in-law. I make dreams come true. I tailor things to your own wishes.'

Careful, Orpheus, you don't have the book back yet. What are you promising?

'Oh, a magician, are you?' The contempt in the Adderhead's voice was a warning.

'No, I wouldn't call it that,' Orpheus was quick to reply. 'Let's just say my art is black. As black as ink.'

Ink! Of course, Orpheus! he told himself.

Why hadn't he thought of that before? Dustfinger had stolen his favourite book from him, it was true, but Fenoglio had written others. Why wouldn't the old man's words still work even if they didn't come from *Inkheart*? Where were the Bluejay songs that Violante was said to have collected so carefully? Didn't people say she'd ordered Balbulus to fill several books with them?

'Black? A colour I like.' The Adderhead, groaning, heaved himself out of his throne. 'Brother-in-law, give the little viper a horse. I'll take him with me. It's a long way to the Castle in the Lake, and perhaps he'll help me to pass the time.'

Orpheus bowed so deeply that he almost toppled over. 'What an honour!' he stammered – you always had to give powerful people the feeling that you could hardly speak in their presence. 'But in that case, might I most humbly ask Your Highness a favour?'

The Milksop cast him a distrustful glance. What if that fool had bartered Balbulus's books of Fenoglio's songs for a few casks of wine? He'd read him an attack of the plague!

'I am a great lover of the art of book illumination,' Orpheus went on, without taking his eyes off the Milksop, 'and I've heard wonderful things about the library in this castle. I'd very much like to see the books, and perhaps take one or two on the journey. Who knows, I may even be able to entertain you with their contents on the way!'

Indifferently, the Adderhead shrugged his shoulders. 'Why not? If you'll work out, while you're at it, how much silver those that my brother-in-law hasn't yet exchanged for wine are worth.'

The Milksop bent his head, but Orpheus had seen the vicious dislike in his eyes.

'Of course.' Orpheus bowed as low as he could.

The Adderhead came down the steps of the throne and stopped in front of him, breathing heavily. 'When making your

estimate, you should take into account the fact that books illuminated by Balbulus have risen in value!' he remarked. 'After all, he won't be producing any new works without his hand, and that certainly makes those already in existence more valuable, don't you agree?'

Once again Orpheus found it hard not to retch as the Adderhead's foul breath met his face, but all the same he managed to produce an admiring smile.

'How extremely clever of you, Your Highness!' he replied. 'The perfect penalty! May I ask what punishment you intend for the Bluejay? Perhaps it would be appropriate to separate him from his tongue first, since everyone goes into such raptures about his voice?'

But the Adderhead shook his head. 'No, no. I have better plans for the Bluejay. I'm going to flay him alive and make his skin into parchment, and we want him to be able to scream as it's done to him, don't we?'

'Of course!' breathed Orpheus. 'What a truly fitting punishment for a bookbinder! May I suggest that you write a warning to your enemies on this very special parchment and have it hung up in marketplaces? I will happily provide you with suitable words. In my trade one must be able to use words with skill.'

'Well, well, you're obviously a man of many talents.' The Adderhead was examining him with something like amusement.

Now, Orpheus! he told himself. Even if you do find Fenoglio's songs in the library, there's no substitute for that one book. Tell him about *Inkheart*!

'I assure you, all my talents are at your disposal, Highness,' he faltered. 'But to practise my arts to perfection I need something that was stolen from me.'

'Indeed? And what might that be?'

‘A book, Your Grace! The Fire-Dancer has stolen it, but I believe he did it at the request of the Bluejay, who is certain to know where it is now. So if you were to ask him about it as soon as he is in your power ...’

‘A book? Did the Bluejay bind you a book too, I wonder?’

‘Oh no. No!’ Orpheus waved the mere notion away. ‘He has nothing to do with *this* book. No bookbinder captured its power inside the covers. It’s the words in it that make it powerful. With those words, Your Grace, this world can be re-created, and every living thing in it made subject to your own purposes.’

‘Indeed? For instance, trees would bear silver fruit? It could be night for ever if I wanted?’

How he was staring at him – like a snake staring at a mouse! Not a word out of place now, Orpheus!

‘Oh, yes.’ Orpheus nodded eagerly. ‘I brought your brother-in-law a unicorn with the aid of that book. And a dwarf.’

The Adderhead cast the Milksop a derisive glance. ‘Yes, that sounds like the kind of thing my good brother-in-law would want. My wishes would be rather different.’

He scrutinized Orpheus with satisfaction. Obviously the Adderhead had realized that the same kind of heart beat in both their breasts – black with vanity and the desire for vengeance, in love with its own cunning, full of contempt for those whose hearts were ruled by other feelings. Orpheus knew what state his own heart was in, and he feared only that those inflamed eyes might also uncover what he hid even from himself: his envy of the innocence of others, his longing for an unblemished heart.

‘What about my rotting flesh?’ The Adderhead passed his swollen fingers over his face. ‘Can you cure that too with this book, or do I still need the Bluejay to do it?’

Orpheus hesitated.

‘Ah. I see ... you’re not sure.’ The Adderhead’s mouth twisted, his dark lizard eyes almost lost in his flesh. ‘And you’re clever enough not to promise what you can’t perform. Well, I’ll return to your other promises and give you a chance to ask the Bluejay about the book that was stolen from you.’

Orpheus bowed his head. ‘Thank you, Your Grace!’ Oh, this was going well. Very well indeed.

‘Highness!’ The Milksop was hurrying down the steps of the throne. His voice really was like a duck quacking, and Orpheus imagined not a wild boar or his fabulous unicorn being carried through the streets of Ombra as a trophy of the hunt, but the Milksop himself, his silver-powdered wig full of blood and dust. However, he’d be a poor sight in comparison with the unicorn.

Orpheus exchanged a quick glance with the Adderhead, and for a moment it seemed to him as if they were seeing the same picture.

‘You ought to rest now, my prince,’ said the Milksop, with obviously exaggerated concern. ‘It was a long journey, and another lies ahead of you.’

‘Rest? How am I supposed to rest when you and the Piper have let the man who turned me into a piece of rotting meat escape? My skin is burning. My bones are icy. My eyes feel as if every ray of light pierced them with a pin. I can’t rest until that accursed Book has stopped poisoning me and the man who bound it is dead. I picture it to myself every night, brother-in-law – just ask your sister – every night I pace up and down, unable to sleep, imagining him wailing and screaming and begging me for a quick death, but I’ll have as many torments ready for him as that murderous Book has pages. He’ll curse it even more often than I do – and he’ll very soon find out that my daughter’s skirts are no protection from the Adderhead!’

Once again a racking cough shook him, and for a moment his swollen hands clutched Orpheus by the arm. Their flesh was

pale as a dead fish. It smells like a dead fish too, thought Orpheus. Yet he's still the lord of this story.

'Grandfather!' The boy emerged from the darkness as suddenly as if he had been standing in the shadows all this time. He had a pile of books in his small arms.

'Jacopo!' The Adderhead swung round so abruptly that his grandson stood rooted to the ground. 'How often do I have to tell you that even a prince doesn't walk into the throne-room unannounced?'

'I was here before the rest of you!' Jacopo raised his chin and pressed the books to his chest, as if they could shield him from his grandfather's anger. 'I often come in here to read – over there, behind my great-great-great-grandfather's statue.' He pointed to the statue of a very fat man standing among the columns.

'In the dark?'

'You can see the pictures the words paint in your head better in the dark. Anyway, Sootbird gave me these.' He put out his hand, showing his grandfather a couple of candles.

The Adderhead frowned, and bent down to his grandson. 'You will not read in the throne-room as long as I'm here. You won't even put your head around the door. You will stay in your own room, or I'll have you shut in with the hounds like Tullio, understand? By the emblem of my house, you look more and more like your father. Can't you at least cut your hair?'

Jacopo held the gaze of those reddened eyes for an astonishingly long time, but finally he bowed his head, turned without a word and stalked away, the books still held in front of him like a shield.

'He really is coming to look more like Cosimo all the time!' remarked the Milksop. 'But he gets his arrogance from his mother.'

‘No, he gets it from me,’ the Adderhead told him. ‘A very useful quality for him when he sits on the throne.’

The Milksop cast an anxious glance after Jacopo. But the Adderhead struck his brother-in-law’s chest with his swollen fist. ‘Summon your men!’ he ordered him. ‘I have work for you to do.’

‘Work?’ Looking ill at ease, the Milksop raised his brows. He had dusted them with silver, like his wig.

‘Yes, for a change you won’t be hunting unicorns, you’ll be hunting children. Or do you want to let the Black Prince get away with hiding those brats in the forest, while you and the Piper are busy letting my daughter lead you by the nose like dancing bears?’

The Milksop twisted his pale mouth, looking injured. ‘We had to prepare for your arrival, dear brother-in-law, and try to catch the Bluejay again—’

‘In which attempt you weren’t particularly successful!’ the Adderhead brusquely interrupted him. ‘Luckily my daughter has told us where we can find him, and while I recapture the bird you two so generously allowed to go free, you can bring the children here for me – along with that knife-thrower who calls himself a prince, so that he can watch me skin the Jay. I fear his own skin is too black to make parchment, so I’ll have to think of something else for him. Fortunately I am very inventive in such matters. But, to be sure, they say the same of you, don’t they?’

The Milksop flushed, obviously flattered, although it was clear that the prospect of hunting children through the forest didn’t excite him half as much as a unicorn hunt, perhaps because they were prey that couldn’t be eaten.

‘Good.’ The Adderhead turned and walked on unsteady legs towards the door of the hall. ‘Send me Sootbird and the Piper!’ he called over his shoulder. ‘He should be through with chopping off hands by now. And tell the maids that Jacopo will

go with me to the Castle in the Lake. No one spies on his mother better than that child, even though she doesn't especially like him.'

The Milksop stared at him expressionlessly. 'As you please,' he murmured in a thin voice.

But the Adderhead turned once more as the servants scurried to open the heavy door for him.

'As for you, milkface.' Orpheus couldn't help instinctively giving a start. 'I set off at sunset. My brother-in-law will tell you where you must be then. You'll have to bring your own servant, and a tent. And make sure you don't bore me. Parchment could always be made of your skin too.'

'Your Highness!' Orpheus bowed again, although he was feeling weak at the knees. Had he ever played a more dangerous game? But everything will be all right, he told himself. You wait and see, Orpheus. This story is yours. It was written for you alone. No one loves it better, no one understands it better, certainly not the old fool who wrote it in the first place!

The Adderhead had been gone for some time, but Orpheus still stood there as if beguiled by the promise of the future.

'So you're a magician. Fancy that.' The Milksop was inspecting him as if he were a caterpillar that had turned into a black moth before his eyes. 'Is that why the unicorn was so easy to hunt? Because it wasn't real?'

'Oh, it was real enough,' replied Orpheus with a patronizing smile. It was made of the same stuff as you, he added in his mind. This Milksop creature really was a pathetic character. As soon as he could make the words come to life again he'd write a totally ridiculous kind of death for him. Suppose he had him torn to pieces by his own hounds? No. He'd make him choke to death on a chicken bone at one of his banquets, and then have him falling on his silver-dusted face into a large dish of black pudding. That was it. Orpheus couldn't help smiling.

‘That smile will soon be wiped off your face!’ the Milksop hissed at him. ‘The Adderhead doesn’t like having his expectations disappointed.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you know that better than anyone,’ replied Orpheus. ‘Now kindly show me the library.’

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43

Four Berries

On my wall hangs a Japanese mask
of gilded wood, the mask of an evil demon.
With sympathy, I see
the veins at his temples swelling,
showing what a strain it is to be bad.

Bertolt Brecht,
The Mask of Evil

The marten was worse than the bear. He was watching her, he was chattering her name into the boy's ear (fortunately the boy didn't understand him) and chasing her away. But a time came when the marten followed the boy outside, and the bear just raised his heavy head when she hopped up to the bowl of soup that one of the women had put in front of his master.

Nothing was easier to poison than soup. The Black Prince was arguing with Snapper once again, and his back was turned as she dropped the dark red berries into the dish. Five tiny berries, that was all it would take to send the prince of the robbers to another kingdom, one where his bear wouldn't be able to follow him. But just as she was about to let the fifth berry fall from her beak the wretched marten shot towards her, as if even outside he had scented what she was planning. The berry rolled away, and Mortola prayed to all the devils in hell that four would be enough to kill.

The Black Prince. Another high-minded fool. Presumably his heart felt a pang every time he saw a cripple. He'd never help her to get hold of the book that would let her bargain with Death, not he. But fortunately men like that were less common than white ravens, and most of them died young. Such men didn't want what made other hearts beat faster: riches, power, fame. No, the Black Prince wasn't interested in any of that. Justice made his heart beat faster. Pity. Love. As if life hadn't treated him just as badly as the others. Kicks and blows, pain and hunger. He'd known more than enough of all that. So where did the pity that motivated him come from? And the warmth of his silly heart, the laughter in his face? He simply didn't see the world as it really was, that was the explanation – neither the world nor the people he felt so sorry for. Because if you did see them for what they were, what on earth would make you want to fight and even die for them?

No, if anyone could help her to get her hands on the White Book before the Bluejay wrote in it and ransomed himself from Death, it was Snapper. He was a man after Mortola's own heart. Snapper saw people as they really were: greedy and cowardly, full of self-interest, cunning. Only one kind of injustice had made *him* a robber, injustice to himself. Mortola knew all about him. One of the Laughing Prince's stewards had seized his farm, the way the powerful classes so often simply took what they

wanted. That, and nothing else, had driven him into the forest. Yes, she could deal with Snapper.

Mortola knew exactly how to harness him for her own purposes once the Black Prince was out of the way. ‘What are you all still doing here, Snapper?’ she would whisper to him. ‘There are more important things in life than looking after a few snotty-nosed children! The Bluejay knows why he’s really landed you with them. He’s planning to sell you all! You must kill him before he throws in his lot with the Adderhead’s daughter. How did he try fooling you – by saying he only wanted to write in the White Book to kill the Adderhead? Nonsense! He wants to make himself immortal! And there’s something else I’m sure he hasn’t told you. The White Book doesn’t just keep Death at bay – it makes its owner rich beyond the dreams of avarice!’

Oh yes, Mortola knew how Snapper’s eyes would light up at those words. He didn’t understand what made the Bluejay tick. Nor would he understand that she herself wanted the Book only to buy her son back from Death. But he would certainly set off at once with the prospect of gold and silver before his eyes. As soon as the Black Prince couldn’t stop him any more ... and luckily the berries worked fast.

Gecko called to her. He had filled his hand with breadcrumbs and was holding it up as if there were nothing tastier in the world. What a fool. Thought he knew something about birds. Well, perhaps he really did. After all, she was no ordinary bird. Mortola uttered a hoarse laugh. It sounded strange, coming from that pointed beak, and the Strong Man raised his head and looked up at the rocky ledge where she was perching. Yes, *he* knew about birds and what they said. She’d have to watch him carefully. ‘Oh, never mind, kek-kek-kek, kraaa!’ said the magpie in her, the magpie that thought only of worms and shiny things and the gleam of its black feathers. ‘They’re all fools, fools, such fools. But I am clever. Come along, old woman, let’s fly after the Bluejay and peck his eyes out. What fun!’

Every day it was getting more difficult to keep her wings still when the magpie wanted to spread them, and Mortola had to shake her bird's head harder and harder to make it think human thoughts. Sometimes she couldn't even remember for sure what human thoughts were like.

Now the feathers would shoot out through her skin even without the seeds. She had already swallowed too many, and the poison was wandering through her body and sowing the bird in her blood. Never mind. You'll find a way to drive it out, Mortola, she thought. But first the bookbinder must be dead and her son alive again! His face ... what did it look like? She could hardly remember.

The Black Prince was still arguing with Snapper, as he did so often these days. Eat it! Start eating, you fool! Two other robbers came along – the pock-marked actor who was always at the Prince's side, and Gecko, who saw the world as Snapper did. One of the women came over to them, brought the actor a bowl of soup too and pointed to the one she had put in front of the Prince.

That's right, listen to her! Sit down! Eat! Mortola thrust her head forward. She felt how her human body wanted to shake off the feathers, how it longed to spread and stretch. Yesterday a couple of children had almost caught her shape-shifting. Silly, noisy nuisances. She'd never liked children – except her own son, and she had never let even him see that she loved him. Love ruined you. It made you soft, gullible ...

There. He was eating. At last. Yes, enjoy it, Prince! The bear trotted up to his master and snuffled at the bowl. Get out, you clumsy great brute. Let him eat it. Four berries. Five would have been better, but with a little luck four would do the trick. It was useful that the trees they grew on were far from rare. Two of them stood only a little way below the cave. Resa was always warning the children not to try their berries.

The Black Prince put the bowl to his mouth and drank the dregs. Good. He'd soon feel Death twisting his guts. Mortola uttered a triumphant croak and spread her wings. Gecko raised his hand with the breadcrumbs again as she flew away over his head. Idiot. They were all stupid, very, very stupid. But that was just as well.

The women began ladling soup out for the children, and Silvertongue's daughter stood far away at the back of the long line. There'd be enough time to pick a few berries for her too. More than enough time.



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44

The Hand of Death

Death is great.
Laugh as we may,
we are its own.
In life's bright day
It weeps its way
Into our hearts.

Rainer Maria Rilke,
Closing Piece

Minerva made good soup. Meggie had often eaten it when she was staying with Fenoglio, and the aroma rising from the steaming bowls was so delicious that for a moment the huge, chilly cave really seemed like home. 'Please, Meggie, do eat something!' Resa had said. 'I don't have an appetite any

more than you do, but it's not going to help your father if we starve to death because we're so worried about him.'

No, she supposed not. When she'd asked Farid to call up the fiery pictures for her again, the flames had shown nothing. 'You can't force them!' Farid had muttered in annoyance as he put the ashes back into his bag. 'The flames like to play, so you have to pretend you don't really want anything from them. But how am I supposed to do that when you're staring at them as if it were a matter of life and death?'

Well, what else was it? Even the Black Prince was anxious about Mo. He had decided to follow Violante to the Castle in the Lake with a few men. He was going to set off tomorrow, but he wouldn't take Resa and Meggie with him. 'Of course not,' Meggie's mother had whispered bitterly. 'This world belongs to men.'

Meggie picked up the wooden spoon that Doria had carved for her (it was a very good spoon) and listlessly stirred the soup. Jasper peered at it longingly. Of course. Glass men loved human food, although it wasn't good for them. Jasper was spending more and more time with Doria, even though Farid was back. Meggie wasn't surprised. Farid had been far from talkative since Dustfinger sent him away again. Most of the time he walked restlessly in the surrounding hills or tried to call up pictures in the fire. So far Roxane had looked into the flames only once. 'Thank you,' she had said to Farid afterwards, her voice cool. 'But I'd rather go on listening to my heart. It usually tells me whether he's all right.'

'There, isn't that just what I told Dustfinger?' Farid had said, annoyed. 'So why did he send me to her? She doesn't need me. She'd bewitch me away if she could.'

Doria offered Jasper his spoon.

'Don't give him any!' said Meggie. 'He can't digest it! Ask him.' She was very fond of Jasper. He was so much friendlier

than Rosenquartz, who liked nothing better than losing his temper and quarrelling with Fenoglio.

‘She’s right,’ muttered Jasper gloomily, but his sharp little nose sniffed, as if at least to fill his glass body with the forbidden aroma. The children sitting around Meggie giggled. They all liked the glass man, and Doria often had to rescue him from their small hands. They liked the marten too, but Jink snapped and spat when the fuss the children made of him got to be too much. The glass man, however, had little defence against human fingers.

The soup really did smell good. Meggie dipped her spoon into her bowl – and jumped when the magpie that had flown to Gecko fluttered over to her own shoulder. By now the bird seemed to belong in the cave, like Jink and the bear, but Resa disliked it.

‘Get away!’ she said, shooing the magpie off Meggie’s shoulder. The bird croaked angrily and jabbed at Resa with its beak. Meggie was so startled that she spilt the hot soup over her hands.

‘Sorry.’ Resa mopped the liquid off Meggie’s fingers with the hem of her dress. ‘I can’t stand that bird. I expect it’s because it reminds me of Mortola.’

The Magpie – of course. It was a long time since Meggie had thought about Capricorn’s mother, but then she hadn’t been there when Mortola had shot Mo. Resa had.

‘It’s only a bird,’ said Meggie, her thoughts already far away again, following her father. She had found very little about the Castle in the Lake in Fenoglio’s book. *Deep in the mountains, in the middle of a lake ... an endless bridge over black water.* Was Mo riding over that bridge now? Suppose she and Resa simply followed the Black Prince? *Do you hear, Meggie? Whatever happens, stay with the robbers! Promise me!*

Resa pointed to the bowl in her lap. ‘Do please eat it, Meggie!’

But Meggie turned to Roxane, who was quickly making her way past the children as they sat there eating. Her beautiful face was paler than Meggie had seen it since Dustfinger's return. Resa stood up, looking anxious.

'What's happened?' She took Roxane's arm. 'Is there any news? Has anything been heard of Mo? You must tell me!'

But Roxane shook her head. 'The Prince ...' The anxiety in her voice was plainly audible. 'He's not well, and I don't know what it is. He has terrible stomach cramps. I have a few roots here that may help him.'

She moved on, but Resa held her back again. 'Stomach cramps? Where is he?'

Meggie heard the bear's howl from far away. The Strong Man was looking like a desperate child as they made their way towards him. Battista was there too, with Woodenfoot and Elfbane. The Black Prince lay on the ground. Minerva was kneeling beside him, trying to get some liquid into his mouth, but he writhed in pain, pressed his hands to his body and struggled for breath. Sweat stood out on his forehead.

'Quiet, bear!' he gasped. He could hardly get the words past his lips; he had bitten them in his pain until they bled. But the bear went on howling and snorting as if his own life was at stake.

'Let me by.' Resa pushed them all aside, even Minerva, and took the Prince's face between her hands.

'Look at me!' she said. 'Please, look at me!'

She wiped the sweat from his brow and looked into his eyes.

Roxane came back with a few roots in her hand, and the magpie flapped its way over to Gecko's shoulder.

Resa stared at it.

'Strong Man!' she said, so quietly that no one but Meggie heard her. 'Catch that bird.'

The magpie jerked its head as the Black Prince writhed in Minerva's arms.

The Strong Man looked at Resa, his face streaming with tears, and nodded. But when he took a step towards Gecko, the magpie flew away and perched on a ledge high up below the roof of the cave.

Roxane knelt beside Resa.

'He's lost consciousness,' said Minerva. 'And see how shallow his breathing is!'

'I've seen cramps like these before.' Resa's voice was trembling. 'The berries that cause them are dark red, not much bigger than a pinhead. Mortola liked to use them because they're easily mixed with food, and they bring a very painful death. There are two of the trees they grow on just below this cave! I've warned the children not to eat the berries.' She looked up at the magpie again.

'Is there an antidote?' Roxane straightened her back. The Black Prince lay there as if dead, and the bear pushed his muzzle into his master's side and moaned like a human being.

'Yes. A flower with tiny white blooms that smell of carrion.' Resa was still looking up at the bird. 'The root alleviates the effect of the berries.'

'What's wrong with him?' Fenoglio made his way past the women, a look of concern on his face. Elinor was with him. The pair of them had spent all morning in Fenoglio's corner of the cave, arguing about what was good in his story and what wasn't. Whenever someone came near them they lowered their voices like conspirators, as if any of the children or the robbers could have understood what they were talking about.

Elinor put her hand to her mouth with alarm when she saw the Black Prince lying there motionless. She looked incredulous, as if she had found a wrongly printed page in a book.

‘Poisoned.’ The Strong Man stood up, clenching his fists. His face was the dark red colour that it usually turned only when he was drunk. He took Gecko by his scrawny neck and shook him like a rag doll. ‘Did you do this?’ he cried. ‘Or was it Snapper? Come on, tell us or I’ll beat it out of you! I’ll break all your bones until you’re writhing in agony too!’

‘Let him go!’ Roxane snapped. ‘That’s not going to help the Prince now!’

The Strong Man let go of Gecko and started sobbing. Minerva put her arms round him. But Resa looked up at the magpie again.

‘The plant you describe sounds like deathbud,’ Roxane told her, while Gecko, coughing, rubbed his neck and cursed the Strong Man roundly. ‘It’s very rare. And even if it grew here it would have died down in the cold long ago. Isn’t there anything else?’

The Black Prince came to his senses and tried to sit up, but he fell back with a groan. Battista knelt down beside him and looked at Roxane in search of help. The Strong Man too turned his tearful eyes on her like a pleading dog.

‘Don’t stare at me like that!’ she cried, and Meggie heard the desperation in her voice. ‘I can’t help him. Try giving him retchwort,’ she told Minerva. ‘And I’ll go and look for deathbud roots, though I’m afraid there’s not much point.’

‘Retchwort will only make it worse,’ said Resa in a toneless voice. ‘Believe me, I’ve seen this often enough.’

The Black Prince gasped in agony and buried his face against Battista’s side. Then his body suddenly went limp, as if it had lost its battle against the pain. Roxane quickly knelt down beside him, putting her ear to his chest and her fingers on his mouth. Meggie tasted her own tears on her lips, and the Strong Man began sobbing like a child.

‘Still alive,’ said Roxane. ‘But only just.’

Gecko slipped away, probably to tell Snapper what was going on. But Elinor whispered something to Fenoglio. He turned away angrily, but Elinor held him back and went on talking insistently to him. 'Don't make such a fuss!' Meggie heard her whisper. 'Of course you can do it! Are you going to leave him to die?'

Meggie was not the only one to have heard those last words. The Strong Man, bewildered, mopped the tears off his face. The bear groaned again and nuzzled his master's side. But Fenoglio still stood there, staring at the unconscious Prince. Then he took a hesitant step in Roxane's direction.

'This ... er ... this flower, Roxane ...'

Elinor stayed right behind him, as if she had to make sure he said the right thing. Fenoglio looked at her in annoyance.

'What?' Roxane looked at him.

'Tell me more about it. Where does it grow? How tall is it?'

'It likes moist, shady places, but why ask? I told you, it'll have died down in the frost long ago.'

'White flowers, tiny. Shady, moist surroundings.' Fenoglio passed his hand over his tired face. Then he turned abruptly and took Meggie's arm.

'Come with me,' he told her in a low voice. 'We must hurry.'

'Moist and shady,' he murmured as he led Meggie off with him. 'Right, so if they grew at the entrance of a brownie's burrow, protected by the warm air coming out of the burrow where a few brownies are hibernating ... yes, that makes sense. Yes!'

The cave was almost empty. The women had taken the children out so that they wouldn't hear the Prince's cries of pain. A few small groups of robbers still sat there in silence, staring at one another as if wondering which of them had tried to kill their leader. Snapper was near the entrance with Gecko,

and he returned Meggie's glance with such a black expression that she quickly looked the other way.

Fenoglio, however, did not avoid his eyes. 'I wonder if it was Snapper,' he whispered to Meggie. 'Yes, I really do wonder.'

'If anyone ought to know it's you!' muttered Elinor, who had followed them. 'Who else made up that horrible fellow?'

Fenoglio spun round as if something had stung him. 'Now you listen to me, Loredan! I've been patient with you so far because you're Meggie's aunt—'

'Great-aunt,' Elinor corrected him, unmoved.

'Whatever. I never invited you into this story, so you will kindly spare me any remarks about my characters in future!'

'Oh, will I?' Elinor's voice rose. It was loud enough to echo right through the huge cave. 'And suppose I'd spared you my comment just now? Your befuddled brain would never have thought of getting the flower here by—'

Fenoglio pressed his hand roughly over her mouth. 'How many more times do I have to tell you?' he hissed. 'Not a word about writing, understand? I haven't the faintest desire to be drawn and quartered as a wizard because of a stupid woman.'

'Fenoglio!' Meggie pulled him forcibly away from Elinor. 'The Black Prince! He's dying!'

Fenoglio stared at her for a fraction of a second, as if he thought her interruption was in the worst possible taste, but then, without a word, he retreated to the corner where he slept. Stony-faced, he cleared a wineskin aside and found a bundle of papers under a few clothes. To Meggie's surprise, most of the sheets already had writing on them.

'Curse it all, where's Rosenquartz?' he muttered as he took a blank sheet. 'Out and about with Jasper again, no doubt. The moment two of them get together they forget their work and go looking for wild glass women. As if the glass women would give one of those pink good-for-nothings so much as a glance!'

Paying no attention to the written pages, he put them aside. So many words. How long ago had he begun writing again? Meggie tried reading the first of the sheets. 'Only a few ideas,' muttered Fenoglio when their eyes met. 'Trying to see how all this could yet end well. What part your father will play in the story ...'

Meggie's heart turned over, but Elinor got in ahead of her.

'Aha! So it was you who wrote all that about Mortimer after all: letting himself be taken prisoner, then riding to that castle, while my niece cries her eyes out at night!'

'No, it wasn't me!' Fenoglio snapped at her angrily, as he quickly hid the written sheets under his clothes again. 'I didn't have him talking to Death either – though I must say I really like that part of the story. I tell you, these are just some ideas! Useless scribbling that leads nowhere! And it'll probably be the same with what I'm trying to do now. But I'll have a shot at it all the same. So kindly be quiet! Or do you want to talk the Black Prince into his grave?'

As Fenoglio dipped his pen in the ink, Meggie heard a slight sound behind her. With a clearly embarrassed expression, Rosenquartz emerged from behind the rock on which Fenoglio's writing things stood. The pale green face of a wild glass woman appeared behind him. Without a word, she scurried away past Fenoglio and Meggie.

'I don't believe it!' thundered the old man, in such a loud voice that Rosenquartz put his hands over his ears. 'The Black Prince is at death's door, and you're gadding about with a wild glass woman!'

'The Prince?' Rosenquartz looked at Fenoglio in such dismay that he calmed down at once. 'But, but—'

'Stop all that gabbling and stir the ink!' Fenoglio snapped. 'And if you were going to say something clever like, "But the Prince is such a good man!" that never kept anyone alive yet in any world, did it?' He dipped his pen in the ink so vigorously

that it splashed Rosenquartz's pink face, but Meggie saw that the old man's fingers were shaking. 'Come on, then, Fenoglio!' he whispered to himself. 'It's only a flower. You can do it!'

Rosenquartz was watching him with concern, but Fenoglio just stared at the blank sheet before him. He stared at it like a torero facing a bull.

'The entrance to the brownie burrow where the plant grows lies where Elfbane sets his snares!' he murmured. 'And the flowers smell so horrible that the fairies give them a wide berth. But moths love them, grey moths with wings patterned as if a glass man had painted tiny death's-heads on them. Can you see them, Fenoglio? Yes ...'

He put pen to paper, hesitated – and began to write.

New words. Fresh words. Meggie thought she could hear the story taking a deep breath. Nourishment at last, after all the time when Orpheus had merely fed it with Fenoglio's old words.

'There we are! He only has to be brought up to the mark, you see. He's a lazy old man,' Elinor whispered to her. 'Of course he can still do it, even if he won't believe it himself. You don't forget that kind of thing. I mean, could you forget how to read?'

I don't know, Meggie was going to reply, but she said nothing. Her tongue was waiting for Fenoglio's words. Healing words. Like the words she had once read for Mo.

'Why is the bear howling like that?' Meggie felt Farid's hands on her shoulders. She supposed he had been off in some place where the children couldn't find him, to try conjuring up fire again, but judging by his glum face the flames had refused to show anything.

'Oh no! Him too!' cried the exasperated Fenoglio. 'Why did Darius and I pile up all these rocks? So that anyone and everyone can march into my bedroom? I need peace! This is a matter of life and death!'

‘Life and death?’ Farid looked at Meggie in alarm.

‘The Black Prince ... he ... he ...’ Elinor was trying to sound composed, but her voice was shaking.

‘Not another word!’ said Fenoglio, without looking up. ‘Rosenquartz! Sand!’

‘Sand? Where am I supposed to find sand?’ Rosenquartz’s voice rose shrilly.

‘Oh, you really are useless! Why do you think I dragged you off to this wilderness with me? For a nice holiday so that you can chase green glass women?’ Fenoglio blew on the wet ink and handed Meggie the sheet he had just written. He looked unsure of himself.

‘Make them grow, Meggie!’ he said. ‘A few last healing leaves, warmed by the breath of sleeping brownies, picked before the winter freezes them.’

Meggie stared at the paper. There it was again, the story she had last heard when she had brought Orpheus here.

Yes. The words obeyed Fenoglio once again. And she would teach them how to live.





45

Written and Unwritten

The characters have their own lives and their own logic, and you have to act accordingly.

**Isaac Bashevis Singer,
*Advice to Writers***

Roxane found the plants exactly where Fenoglio had described: in the entrance of a brownie burrow where Elfbane set his snares. And Meggie, holding Despina's hand, watched again as the words that she had only just read became reality.

The leaves and flowers defied the cold wind, as if the fairies had planted them so that they could dream of summer when they saw them. But the smell rising from the flowers was the odour of decomposition and decay, and it had given the plant its name:

deathbud. The flowers were put on graves to placate the White Women.

Roxane brushed the moths off the leaves, dug up two plants and left two others, for fear of angering the wood-elves. Then she hurried back to the cave, where the White Women were already standing at the Black Prince's side, grated the roots, brewed them using the method Resa had described to her, and spooned the hot liquid into the Prince's mouth. He was already very weak, yet what they had hardly dared to hope for happened: the brew lessened the effect of the poison, lulled it to sleep, and brought back the strength of life.

And the White Women disappeared, as if Death had called them to another place.

Those last sentences had been easy to read, but many anxious hours passed before they too became reality. The poison was not giving in without a struggle, and the White Women came and went. Roxane strewed herbs to keep them away, as she had learnt to do from Nettle, but the pale faces kept appearing again, barely visible against the grey walls of the cave, and a time came when Meggie felt they were looking not just at the Prince, but at her too.

Don't we know you? their eyes seemed to ask. Didn't your voice protect the man who has been ours twice? Meggie returned their glance for little longer than it takes to draw a breath, yet she immediately felt the longing that Mo had spoken of: longing for a place that lay far beyond all words. She took a step towards the White Women to feel their cool hands on her beating heart, to let them wipe away all her fear and pain, but other hands held her back, warm, firm hands.

'Meggie, for heaven's sake don't look at them!' Elinor murmured. 'Come on, let's get you out into the fresh air. Why, you're as pale as those creatures themselves!'

And she wouldn't take no for an answer, but led Meggie outside to where the robbers were consulting together and the

children played under the trees, as if they had forgotten what was going on in the cave. The grass was white with hoarfrost, white as the figures waiting for the Black Prince, but the spell of the White Women was broken as soon as Meggie heard the children's laughter. They were throwing fir cones for the marten and shouting as he chased them. Life seemed so much stronger than death, death so much stronger than life. Like the ebb and flow of the tide.

Resa was standing outside the cave too, wrapping her arms around herself for warmth, although the Strong Man had put a rabbit-skin cloak over her shoulders. 'Have you seen Snapper?' she asked Elinor. 'Or Gecko and his magpie?'

Battista joined them. He looked exhausted. This was the first time he had left the Prince's side. 'They've gone,' he said. 'Snapper, Gecko and ten others. They went after the Bluejay as soon as it was clear that the Prince wasn't likely to be able to follow him.'

'But Snapper hates Mo!' Resa's voice was so loud that several robbers turned to look at her, and even the children paused their game. 'Why would he want to help him?'

'I'm afraid he has no intention of helping him,' Battista replied quietly. 'He's been telling the others he's going because the Bluejay plans to betray us and make his own bargain with Violante. And he said your husband hasn't told us the whole truth about the White Book.'

'What kind of truth?' Resa's voice was failing her.

'Snapper says,' Battista replied quietly, 'that the Book doesn't just make its owner immortal, it makes him immensely rich. That sounds a lot more tempting to most of our men than immortality. They'd betray their own mothers for a book like that. So why, they ask themselves, wouldn't the Bluejay plan on doing the same to us?'

'But that's all lies! The Book makes its owner immortal, nothing more.' Meggie didn't care that her voice was rising. Let

them all hear her, all of them putting their heads together, whispering about her father!

Elfbane turned to her, an unpleasant smile on his thin face. 'Oh yes? And how would you know that, little witch? Didn't your father keep it a secret from you that the Book was making the Adderhead's flesh rot on his bones?'

'What if he did?' Elinor asked Elfbane angrily, putting a protective arm around Meggie. 'She still knows one thing: she can certainly trust her father more than a poisoner. Because who else poisoned the Prince if not your beloved Snapper?'

There was a rather unfriendly murmuring among the robbers, and Battista drew Elinor over to his side.

'Mind what you say!' he whispered to her. 'Not all Snapper's friends went with him. And if you ask me, poison doesn't sound much like Snapper. A knife, yes, but poison ...'

'Oh no? Then who else would it be?' Elinor retorted.

Resa looked up at the sky as if the answer might be found there. 'Did Gecko take his magpie with him?' she asked.

Battista nodded. 'Yes, luckily. The children are scared of it.'

'With good reason.' Resa looked up at the sky again, and then at Battista. 'What exactly does Snapper mean to do?' she asked. 'Tell me.'

Battista just shrugged wearily. 'I don't know. Maybe he's going to try to steal the Book from the Adderhead before he reaches the Castle in the Lake. Or maybe he's going straight there to get it for himself after the Bluejay has written the three words in it. Whatever his plan is, there's nothing we can do. The children need us, and until the Prince gets better he needs us too. Remember, Dustfinger is with the Bluejay. Snapper won't have an easy time of it with the pair of them! Now forgive me, but I must go back to the Prince.'

Snapper won't have an easy time of it with the pair of them! Yes, but what if he really did steal the White Book from the

Adderhead on the way, and the Adderhead arrived at the Castle in the Lake knowing that even the Bluejay couldn't help him now? Wouldn't he kill Mo then and there? And even if Mo did get a chance to write those three words on the blank pages ... what if Snapper poisoned him afterwards, as ruthlessly as he'd presumably poisoned the Prince, just to get his hands on the Book?

What if, what if ... those questions kept Meggie awake even when all had long been sleeping around her, and finally she got up to go and see how the Black Prince was.

He was sleeping. The White Women had gone, but his dark face was still as grey as if their hands had bleached his skin. Minerva and Roxane were taking turns to sit at his side, and Fenoglio was with them, as if he must watch over his own words if they were to remain effective.

Fenoglio ... Fenoglio could write again.

What did the sheets of paper he had hidden under his clothes say?

'Why did you make up the Bluejay for your robber songs, why didn't you just write about the Black Prince?' Meggie had asked him long ago.

'Because the Prince was tired,' Fenoglio had replied. 'The Black Prince needed the Bluejay as much as the poor people who whispered his name at night. The Prince had been part of this world for too long to believe it could really be changed. And his men never doubted that he was flesh and blood like them. They're not nearly so sure about your father. Do you understand now?'

Meggie understood only too well. But Mo *was* flesh and blood, and she was sure that Snapper didn't doubt it. When she returned to the sleepers, Darius had taken two of the children on to his lap and was quietly telling them a story. The little ones often woke him in the middle of the night because he knew how to drive away their bad dreams with stories, and

Darius patiently resigned himself to his task. He liked Fenoglio's world, although it probably frightened him more than Elinor – but would he change it with his voice if Fenoglio asked him to? Would he read aloud what Meggie herself might not want to?

What was on the sheets of paper that Fenoglio had hidden so hastily from her and Elinor?

What did they say?

Go and look, Meggie, she told herself. You won't be able to sleep anyway.

As she went round behind the wall marking off the place where Fenoglio slept, she heard Rosenquartz's quiet snoring. His master was sitting with the Black Prince, but the glass man lay on the clothes under which Fenoglio had hidden the written pages. Meggie carefully picked him up, surprised as usual to feel how cold his transparent limbs were, and laid him on the cushion that Fenoglio had brought with him from Ombra. Yes, the pages were still exactly where he had hidden them from Elinor and her. There were more than a dozen, covered with words written in haste – scraps of sentences, questions, snippets of ideas that presumably made no sense to anyone but their author: *the pen or the sword? Who does Violante love? Careful, the Piper ... Who writes the three words?* Meggie couldn't decipher all of it, but on the very first page, in capital letters, were the words that made her heart beat faster: *The Song of the Bluejay*.

'Just ideas, Meggie, as I told you. Only questions and ideas.'

Fenoglio's voice made her spin round in such alarm that she almost dropped the pages on the sleeping Rosenquartz.

'The Prince is rather better,' said Fenoglio, as if she had come to him to hear that. 'It really does look as if my words have kept someone alive for once, instead of killing them. But then again, perhaps he's only alive because this story thinks he can still be useful to it. How would I know?' He sat down beside Meggie with a sigh and gently took what he had written from her hand.

‘Your words saved Mo too, before all this,’ she said.

‘Yes, maybe.’ Fenoglio brushed his hand over the dry ink as if that would dust the words free of anything harmful. ‘All the same, you don’t trust them now any more than I do, do you?’

He was right. She had learnt both to love and to fear the words.

‘Why *The Song of the Bluejay*?’ she asked softly. ‘You can’t write any more about him! He’s my father now! Make up a new hero. I’m sure you can invent one. But let Mo be Mo again, just Mo and no one else.’

Fenoglio looked at her thoughtfully. ‘Are you sure that’s what your father himself wants? Or don’t you mind about that?’

‘Of course I do!’ Meggie’s voice was so sharp that Rosenquartz woke with a start. He looked around him with a bewildered expression – and fell asleep again. ‘But Mo certainly wouldn’t want you catching him in your words like a fly in a spider’s web. You’re changing him!’

‘Nonsense! Your father himself decided to be the Bluejay! I just wrote a few songs, and you’ve never read a single one of them aloud! So how would they change anything?’

Meggie bowed her head.

‘Oh no!’ Fenoglio looked at her, horrified. ‘You *did* read them?’

‘After Mo rode to the castle. To protect him, to make him strong and invulnerable. I read them aloud every day.’

‘Well, who’d have thought it! Then let’s hope the words in the songs work as well as those I’ve written for the Black Prince.’ Fenoglio put an arm around her shoulders, as he had often done when they were both Capricorn’s prisoners – in another world, in another story. Or was it the same story after all?

‘Meggie,’ he said quietly. ‘Even if you go on reading my songs aloud, even if you read them a dozen times a day – we both

know they haven't made your father the Bluejay. If I'd chosen him as the model for the Piper, do you think he'd have become a murderer? Of course not! Your father is like the Black Prince! He feels for the weak. *I* didn't write that into his heart – it was always there! Your father didn't ride to Ombra Castle because of my words but for the children asleep out there. Perhaps you're right. Perhaps this story is changing him, but he's changing the story too! He's telling the next part of it through what he does, Meggie, not because of what I write. Even if the right words might be able to help him ...'

'Protect him, Fenoglio!' Meggie whispered. 'Snapper's after him, and he hates Mo.'

Fenoglio looked at her in surprise. 'What do you mean? You actually want me to write something about him? Heavens, it was confusing enough when I had only my own characters to worry about!'

And you let them die without giving it a thought, Meggie told herself, but she didn't say so aloud. After all, Fenoglio had saved the Black Prince today – and he had really feared for him. What would Dustfinger have said about this sudden fit of sympathy?

Rosenquartz started snoring again.

'Hear that?' asked Fenoglio. 'Can you tell me how such a ridiculously small creature can snore at such volume? Sometimes I feel like stuffing him in the inkwell overnight just to get some peace and quiet!'

'You're a terrible old man!' Meggie reached for the written pages again and ran her finger along the words jotted down there. 'What does all this mean? *The pen or the sword? Who writes the three words? Who does Violante love?*'

'Well, those are only some of the questions to be answered as this story goes on. All good stories hide behind a tangle of questions, and it isn't easy to find out their dodges. And this story certainly has a mind of its own, but,' and here Fenoglio

lowered his voice as if the story itself could be eavesdropping, 'if you ask the right questions it will whisper all its secrets to you. A story like this is a very talkative thing.'

Fenoglio read aloud what he had written. *'The pen or the sword? A very important question. But I don't know the answer yet. Perhaps it will be both. Well, however that may be ... Who will write the three words? Your father let himself be taken prisoner to do that, but who knows ... will the Adderhead really allow his daughter to trick him? Is Violante as clever as she thinks, and who does Her Ugliness love? I am afraid she's fallen in love with your father. I think she fell in love with him a long time ago, before she ever met him.'*

'What?' Meggie looked at him in astonishment. 'What are you talking about? Violante isn't much older than me and Brianna!'

'Nonsense! Not in years, perhaps, but with all the experience she's had, she's at least three times your age. And like so many princes' daughters she has a very romantic notion of robbers. Why do you think she made Balbulus illuminate all my Bluejay songs? And now he's riding along beside her in flesh and blood. Not unromantic, is it?'

'You're dreadful!' Meggie's indignant voice woke Rosenquartz again.

'Why? I'm only explaining what would have to be taken into account if I were really to try bringing this story to a good end, although it may have had different ideas itself for some time. Suppose I'm right? Suppose Violante loves the Bluejay and your father rejects her? Will she protect him from the Adderhead all the same? What role will Dustfinger take? Will the Piper see what game Violante is playing? Questions, nothing but questions! Believe you me, this story is a labyrinth! It looks as if there were several ways to go, but only one is right, and there's a nasty surprise ready to punish you for every false step. This time, though, I'll be prepared. This time I'll see the traps it's setting me, Meggie – and I'll find the right way out. But for that

I have to ask questions. For instance: where's Mortola? I can't get that question out of my mind. And what, by all inky devils, is Orpheus up to? Questions, more and more questions ... but Fenoglio is back in the game again! And he's saved the Black Prince!

Every wrinkle in his old face expressed self-satisfaction.

Oh, he really was a terrible old man!

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46

The Castle in the Lake

There is something about it that opens no door to words.

John Steinbeck,
Travels with Charlie

They rode north, further and further north. On the morning of the second day, Violante had Mo's hands, bound until now for fear of her father's spies, loosened after one of her soldiers told her that otherwise the Bluejay would soon lose the use of them. More than fifty soldiers had been waiting for them barely a mile out of Ombra. Hardly any of them were older than Farid, and they all looked as determined as if they would follow Violante to the end of the world.

With every mile they put behind them the woods were darker and the valleys deeper. The hills became mountains. Snow

already lay on some of the passes, so that they had to dismount and lead their horses, and on the second night rain fell, covering the white snow with treacherous ice. The mountain range through which they were riding seemed almost uninhabited. Only very occasionally did Mo see a village in the distance, an isolated farmhouse or a charcoal-burner's hut. It was almost as if Fenoglio had forgotten to populate this part of his world.

Dustfinger joined them when they first stopped to rest. He did it as naturally as if nothing were simpler than to pick up the trail that Violante's soldiers were so carefully obliterating. The soldiers looked at him in the same respectful but wary way as they looked at Mo. Bluejay ... Fire-Dancer ... of course they knew the songs, and their eyes asked: are these men made of the same flesh as us?

For himself, Mo knew the answer – although he sometimes wondered whether by now ink, rather than blood, flowed through his veins. He wasn't so sure about Dustfinger. The horses shied when they saw him, although he could calm them with a whisper. He hardly slept or ate, and he plunged his hands into fire as if it were water. But when he talked about Roxane or Farid, there was human love in his words, and when he looked round for his daughter surreptitiously, as if he were ashamed of it, it was with the eyes of a mortal father.

It was good to ride, just to ride on while the Inkworld unfurled before them like elaborately folded paper. And with every mile Mo doubted more and more that all this had really been made by Fenoglio's words. Wasn't it more likely that the old man had simply been a reporter describing a tiny part of this world, a fraction of it that they had long ago left behind? Strange mountains rimmed the horizon, and Ombra was far away. The Wayless Wood seemed as distant as Elinor's garden, the Castle of Night nothing but a dark dream.

'Have you ever been in these mountains before?' he once asked Dustfinger, who rode beside him in silence most of the

time. Sometimes Mo thought he could hear the other man's thoughts. *Roxane*, they whispered. And Dustfinger's eyes kept wandering to his daughter, who was riding at Violante's side and didn't deign to give her father a glance.

'No, I don't think so,' replied Dustfinger, and it was the same as every time Mo spoke to him: it seemed as if he were calling him back from that place for which there were no words. Dustfinger didn't talk about it, and Mo asked no questions. He knew what the other man was thinking. The White Women had touched them both, sowing in their hearts a longing for that place, a constant, wordless, bittersweet longing.

Dustfinger looked over his shoulder as if in search of a familiar view. 'I never rode north in the old days. The mountains frightened me,' he said, and smiled as if he were smiling at his old self, who had known so little of the world that a few mountains could scare him. 'I was always drawn to the sea. The sea and the south.'

Then he fell silent again. Dustfinger had never been very talkative, and his journey to the land of Death hadn't changed that. So Mo left him to his silence and wondered, once more, whether the Black Prince had heard yet from Farid that the Bluejay was no longer in Ombra, and how Meggie and Resa had taken the news. It was so hard to leave them further behind with every step his horse took, even if he did it knowing that the further away he was, the safer they were. Don't think about them, he told himself. Don't wonder when or whether you'll see them again. Tell yourself the Bluejay never had a wife or a daughter. Just for a while.

Violante turned in the saddle as if to make sure she hadn't lost him. Brianna whispered something to her, and Violante smiled. Her Ugliness had a beautiful smile, although you seldom saw it. It showed how young she still was.

They were riding up a densely wooded hill. Sunlight fell through the branches of the almost leafless trees, and in spite of

the snow covering the moss and roots further up the slopes there was still a smell of autumn here, of rotting leaves and the last fading flowers. Fairies, drowsy with the onset of winter, flitted through the grass, which was yellow now and stiff with frost. Brownie tracks crossed their path, and Mo thought he heard wild glass men scurrying about under the bushes that grew on the slope above them. One of Violante's soldiers began to sing quietly, and the sound of his young voice made Mo feel as if everything he had left behind were fading: his concern for Resa and Meggie, the Black Prince, the children of Ombra and the threat of the Piper, even his bargain with Death. There was only the path, the endless path winding up into the strange mountains, and the desire in his heart that he couldn't tame, a wish to ride further and further on into this bewildering world. What did the castle to which Violante was leading them look like? Were there really giants in the mountains? Where did the path end? Did it ever end at all? Not for the Bluejay, a voice inside him whispered, and for a moment his heart beat like the heart of a ten-year-old boy, as fearless and as fresh.

He sensed Dustfinger's eyes resting on him. 'You like this world of mine.'

'Yes. Yes, I do.' Mo himself could hear the guilt in his voice.

Dustfinger laughed louder than Mo had ever heard him laugh before. He looked so different without the scars – as if the White Women had healed his heart as well as his face. 'And you're ashamed of it!' he said. 'Why? Because you still think everything here is just made of words? It is indeed a strange thing: look at you! Anyone might think you belonged here as much as me. Are you sure someone didn't just read you over into that other world of yours?'

Mo didn't know whether or not he liked that idea. 'Fairly sure,' he answered.

The wind blew a leaf against his chest. Tiny limbs hung from it, a frightened face, pale brown like the leaf itself. Orpheus's

leaf-men had obviously spread quickly. The strange creature bit Mo's finger when he reached for it, and the next gust of wind blew it away.

'Did you see them last night too?' Dustfinger turned in the saddle. The soldier riding behind them avoided his eyes. There is no land more foreign than the realm of Death.

'See who?'

Dustfinger responded with a mocking smile.

There had been two of them. Two White Women. They had been standing among the trees just before daybreak.

'Why do you think they're following us? To remind us that we still belong to them?'

Dustfinger merely shrugged his shoulders, as if the answer wasn't important and the question was the wrong one. 'I see them every time I close my eyes. *Dustfinger!* they whisper. *We miss you. Does your heart hurt again? Do you feel the burden of time? Shall we lift it from you? Shall we make you forget once more?* I tell them no. Let me feel all of it a little longer. Who knows, perhaps you'll be taking me back soon anyway. Me,' he added, looking at Mo, 'and the Bluejay.'

Dark clouds were gathering above them, as if they had been waiting beyond the mountains, and the horses grew restless, but Dustfinger calmed them with a few quiet words.

'What do they whisper to you?' he asked Mo, looking at him as if he knew the answer already.

'Ah.' It was difficult to talk about the White Women. As difficult as if they held his tongue down as soon as he tried. 'Usually they simply stand there as if they were waiting for me. And if they do speak to me they always say the same thing: *only Death will make you immortal, Bluejay.*'

He hadn't told anyone that before, not the Black Prince or Resa or Meggie. What would be the point? The words would only have frightened them.

But Dustfinger knew the White Women – and the one they served. ‘Immortal,’ he repeated. ‘Yes, they like to say such things, and no doubt they’re right. But what about you? Are you in a hurry for immortality?’

Mo could find no answer for that.

Ahead, Violante turned her horse around. The path had brought them to the crest of a mountain, and far below lay a lake with a castle reflected in its waters, drifting on the ripples like a stone fruit floating a long way from the bank. Its walls were as dark as the spruce trees that grew on the slopes of the surrounding mountains, and an almost endless bridge, narrow as a ribbon of stone and supported on countless piers, led over the water to land, where two ruined watchtowers stood among a few abandoned huts.

‘The Impregnable Bridge!’ whispered one of the soldiers, and all the stories he had heard about this place were echoed in that whisper.

It began to snow again, tiny, wet flakes that disappeared in the dark lake as if it were devouring them. Violante’s young soldiers stared at their destination in dismal silence. It was not a very inviting sight. But their mistress’s face lit up like a young girl’s.

‘What do you say, Bluejay?’ she asked Mo, putting her gold-framed glasses on her nose. ‘Look at it. My mother described this castle to me so often that I feel as if I’d grown up here myself. I only wish these glasses were stronger,’ she added impatiently, ‘but even from here I can see that it’s beautiful!’

Beautiful? Mo would have called the castle sinister. But perhaps, to the Adderhead’s daughter, that was one and the same thing.

‘Now do you see why I’ve brought you here?’ Violante asked. ‘No one can take this castle. Even the giants couldn’t harm it when they still came to this valley. The lake is too deep, and the bridge is just wide enough for a single horseman.’

The path leading down to the banks of the lake was so steep that they had to lead their horses. It was as dark under the dense spruce trees as if their needles ate up the daylight, and Mo felt his heart grow heavy again. But Violante walked on impatiently, and the rest of them could hardly keep up with her as they passed through the trees that grew so close together.

‘Night-Mares!’ whispered Dustfinger, when the silence among the trees grew as dark as the needles that covered the ground. ‘Black Bogles, Red-Caps ... everything that would terrify Farid lives here. Let’s hope this castle really is uninhabited.’

When they were standing on the banks of the lake at last, mist hung above the water, and the bridge and the castle rose from the white vapour as if they had just been born out of it. Stony growths from the depths of the water. The huts on the bank looked much more real now, although it was obvious that they had been standing empty for a very long time. Mo led his horse to one of the watchtowers. The door was charred, the interior black with soot.

Violante came to his side. ‘A nephew of my grandfather’s was the last who tried to capture this castle. He never got across the lake. My grandfather bred predatory fish in it. They’re said to be larger than horses, and they crave human flesh. The lake guards this castle better than any army could. There were never many soldiers here, but my grandfather always made sure there were enough provisions to withstand a siege. Cattle were kept in the castle, and he had vegetables grown and fruit trees planted in several of the inner courtyards. All the same, so my mother told me, she had to eat fish more often than she liked.’

Violante laughed, but Mo looked out over the dark water uneasily. It was as if, through the drifting swathes of mist, he saw all the dead soldiers who had tried to cross the Impregnable Bridge. The lake was like a copy of the Inkworld itself, both beautiful and terrible. Its surface was smooth as glass, but the edge of the bank was marshy, and swarms of

buzzing insects, obviously unaffected by the wintry weather, hovered among reeds now white with rime.

‘Why did your grandfather live in such a remote place?’

‘Because he was tired of human beings. Is that surprising?’ Violante was still looking as captivated as if she couldn’t believe that at last her short-sighted eyes were seeing what she had only known through words before. So often it is words or pictures that first tell us what we long for.

‘My mother’s chambers were in the tower on the left. My grandfather had the tower built when giants still came here.’ Violante’s voice sounded as if she were talking in her sleep. ‘At that time this lake was the only place outside the cities where you could be safe from them, because they couldn’t cross it. But they loved to look at their reflection in its waters, and that’s why it was also called the Giants’ Mirror. My mother was afraid of them. She used to hide under the bed when she heard their footsteps, but all the same she wondered how big they would be if they were standing right in front of her, not on the distant bank. Once, when she was about five years old and a giant and his child appeared on the bank, she wanted to run over to them. But one of her nursemaids caught up with her where the bridge begins, and my grandfather had her shut up in the tower there for three days and nights, as a punishment.’ Violante pointed to a tower that rose like a needle among the others. ‘That tower was the only place in the castle that my mother didn’t like to talk about. It had pictures of Night-Mares and lake monsters on its walls, of wolves and snakes and robbers attacking travellers. My grandfather had the pictures painted to show his daughters how dangerous the world beyond the lake was. The giants often used to take human beings – especially children – away as toys. Have you heard that?’

‘I’ve read about it,’ replied Mo.

The happiness in her voice moved him, and he wondered, not for the first time, how it was that the book which had told him

so much about fire-elves and giants said so little about the Adderhead's daughter. To Fenoglio, Violante had been only a minor character, an ugly, unhappy little girl, no more. Perhaps you could learn from her how small parts can be made into major roles if you play them in your own way.

Violante seemed to have forgotten that he was standing beside her. Indeed, she seemed to have forgotten everything, even that she had come here to kill her father. She was looking at the castle as if she hoped to see her mother appear on the battlements at any moment. But at last she turned abruptly.

'Four of you stay by the watchtowers!' she ordered her soldiers. 'The rest come with me. But ride slowly if you don't want the sound of your horses' hooves to entice the fishes. My mother used to tell me how they'd pulled dozens of men down from the bridge.'

An uneasy murmur rose among her soldiers. They really were little more than children.

But Violante took no notice. She picked up her skirts, black like everything Mo had ever seen her wear, and let Brianna help her up on to her horse. 'You'll see,' she said. 'I know this castle better than if I'd lived here. I've studied all the books there are about it. I know its ground plan and all its secrets.'

'Has your father ever been here?' Dustfinger asked the question just as it had formed in Mo's mind too.

Violante picked up her reins. 'Only once,' she said, without looking at Dustfinger. 'When he was courting my mother. But that's a long time ago. All the same, he's sure to remember that no one can take this castle.'

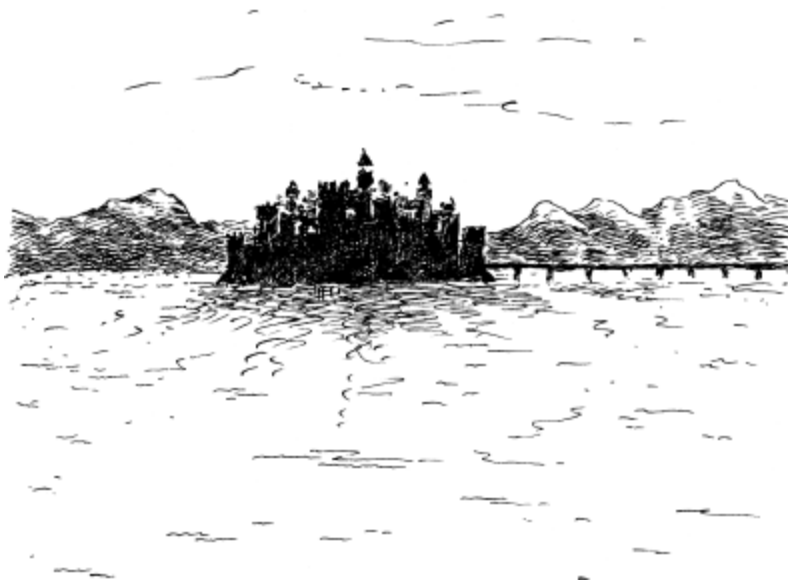
She turned her horse. 'Come, Brianna,' she said, and rode towards the bridge. But her horse shied back when it saw the stone path across the water. Without a word, Dustfinger brought his mount to Violante's side, took the reins from her hand and led her horse on to the bridge behind his. The sound

of their hooves echoed over the water as Violante's men followed him.

Mo was the last to ride on to the bridge. Suddenly the whole world seemed to be made of water. Mist drifted into his face, and the castle swam on the lake before him like a dark dream: towers, battlements, bridges, oriels, windowless walls with the wind and the water eating at them. The bridge seemed to go on for ever, and the gate to which it led looked out of reach, but at last it began to grow larger with every step that his horse took. The towers and walls filled the sky like a menacing song, and Mo saw dark shadows glide through the water, like watchdogs picking up the scent of their coming.

What did the castle look like, Mo? he heard Meggie asking. *Describe it!*

What would he say? He looked up at the towers, as many of them as if a new one grew every year, at the maze of oriels and bridges and the stone griffin above the gateway. 'It didn't look like a happy ending, Meggie,' he heard himself reply. 'It looked like a place from which no one ever comes back.'



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47

The Role of Women

Why would I need a book?
The wind leafs through the trees
Speaking softly at its ease
Words that I sometimes repeat.
And Death, breaking eyes like a flower
Does not have mine in its power ...

Rainer Maria Rilke,
Book of Pictures

Men's clothes. Resa had stolen them from the sleeping Elfbane: a pair of trousers and a long, warm shirt. Very likely they were his pride and joy. Few of the robbers owned more than what they wore on their backs, but over the

next few days she was going to need those clothes more than Elfbane.

It was long ago that the Inkworld had forced Resa to wear men's clothing, yet as soon as she put on the rough trousers the memory came back as if it were only yesterday. She remembered how often the knife had scratched her scalp as she cut her hair short, and how her throat had hurt from the constant attempt to make her voice sound deeper. This time she'd just pin up her hair, and presumably she wouldn't have to pretend to be a man, but trousers were so much more practical than a dress on overgrown paths, and she would have to take such paths if she wanted to follow Mo.

'Promise me!' He had never asked her more fervently for anything. 'Promise me you'll both stay in hiding, never mind what happens, never mind what you hear. And if it all goes wrong –' (what a clever way of getting around saying *if I die*) – 'then Meggie must try to read the two of you back.'

Back where? To Elinor's house, where every nook and cranny reminded her of him, and his workshop stood in the garden? Quite apart from the fact that Elinor herself was on this side of the letters now. But Mo didn't know that, any more than he knew she had burnt the words that Orpheus had written.

No. There was no going back home without him. If Mo died in the Inkworld, then so would she ... hoping that the White Women would take her to wherever he was.

Dark thoughts, Resa, she told herself, placing her hand on her belly. It was so long since Meggie had been growing in there, but her fingers still remembered – all the days when she had felt her body in vain, and then the moment when she suddenly sensed the baby moving under her skin. There was no moment like it, and she could hardly wait to feel the tiny feet kicking below her ribs, the child inside her turning and stretching. It couldn't be long now. If only she didn't have to feel so anxious about the child's father.

‘Come along, let’s go looking for him, to warn him about the Magpie and Snapper!’ she whispered to her unborn child. ‘We’ve been standing back and watching for too long. From now on we’ll play our part, even if Fenoglio hasn’t written us one.’

Only Roxane knew what she was planning, no one else. Not Elinor, not Meggie. They’d both have wanted to come too. But she must go alone, although that would make Meggie angry with her once again. She still hadn’t entirely forgiven Resa for riding to Orpheus, or for that night in the graveyard. Meggie didn’t forgive easily when her father’s wellbeing was at stake. He was the only one she always forgave.

Resa took Fenoglio’s book out from under the blanket beneath which she slept. She had asked Battista to make a leather bag for it, of course without telling him that he himself, more than likely, had been born between its pages. ‘That’s a strange book,’ he had remarked. ‘What scribe writes such ugly letters? And what kind of binding is that? Had the bookbinder run out of leather?’

She wasn’t sure what Dustfinger would have said about her plan. It still touched her that he had entrusted the book to her. But now she must do as she thought right.

She looked across the cave at her daughter. Meggie was sleeping beside Farid, but Doria slept only a little further off, his face turned towards her. Orpheus’s former glass man lay beside him, the boy’s hand over him like a blanket. How young Meggie still looked in her sleep! Resa almost bent down to push the hair back from her daughter’s forehead. It still hurt to think of all the years she had spent away from her; it hurt so much. Hurry up, Resa, she told herself. Day is already beginning to dawn outside. Soon they’d all be awake, and then they wouldn’t let her leave.

Elinor murmured something in her sleep as Resa slipped past her, and the guard at the cave entrance glanced her way when

she went round behind the wall that Fenoglio had built, as if to ward off the world he himself had made. He and his glass man were snoring in competition, like a bear and a grasshopper. Rosenquartz's tiny fingers were black with ink, and the sheet of paper beside him was covered with freshly-written words, but nearly all of them had been crossed out.

Resa put the bag containing the book down beside the wineskin for which Fenoglio was still inclined to reach, even though Elinor lost no opportunity to lecture him on his drinking. She put the letter she had written him between the pages, so that it stuck out of the bag like a white hand. He couldn't miss it.

Fenoglio, she had written – it had taken her a long time to look for the right words, and she still wasn't sure she had found them – I am giving Inkheart back to the man who wrote it. Perhaps your own book can tell you how this story is going to end, and will whisper you words to protect Meggie's father. Meanwhile I will try to make sure, in my own way, that the song of the Bluejay doesn't end sadly. Resa.

The sky was turning red as she stepped out of the cave, and it was bitterly cold. Woodenfoot was standing guard under the trees. He watched suspiciously as she turned north. Perhaps he didn't even recognize her in men's clothing. Some bread and a waterskin, a knife, the compass that Elinor had brought from their old world – that was all she was taking. It wouldn't be the first time she'd had to manage on her own in this world. But she hadn't gone far before she heard heavy footsteps behind her.

'Resa!' The Strong Man sounded injured, like a child catching his sister in the act of running away. 'Where are you going?'

As if he didn't know.

'You can't follow him! I promised him I'd look after you – you and your daughter.' He held her firmly, and anyone held firmly by the Strong Man wasn't going to get away.

‘Let me go!’ she snapped at him. ‘He doesn’t know about Snapper. I have to follow him! You can look after Meggie.’

‘Doria will do that. I’ve never seen him look at a girl the way he looks at her. And Battista’s there too.’ He was still holding her. ‘It’s a long way to the Castle in the Lake. Very long and very dangerous.’

‘Roxane has told me how to get there.’

‘Oh yes? And did she tell you about the Night-Mares? And the Red-Caps, and the Black Elves?’

‘They haunted Capricorn’s fortress too, and every one of his men was worse. So go back. I can look after myself.’

‘I’m sure. And you can take on Snapper and the Piper too.’ Without another word he took the waterskin from her. ‘The Bluejay will kill me when he sees you!’

The Bluejay. Suppose she met only him, and not her husband, at the castle? Mo might understand why she had followed him, but not the Bluejay.

‘Let’s go.’ The Strong Man marched off. He was as obstinate as he was strong. Not even the Black Prince could make him change his mind once he’d made it up, and Resa didn’t even try. It would be good to have his company, very good. She hadn’t often been alone in the forests of the Inkworld, and she didn’t like to remember the times when she was.

‘Strong Man?’ she asked when they had left the cave where her daughter was sleeping far behind. ‘What did you think of the magpie that flew to Gecko?’

‘That was no magpie,’ he said. ‘It had a woman’s voice. But I didn’t say anything. The others would only have said I was crazy again.’



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48

Waiting

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot,
Little Gidding

The Castle in the Lake was an oyster that had closed itself off from the world. Not a single window had a view of the mountains around. Not a single window looked out on the lake lapping at its dark walls. Once you had left the gate behind you there was only the castle: its dark and narrow courtyards, covered bridges linking its towers, walls painted with worlds like nothing that existed in the world outside these windowless fortifications. They showed gardens and gently rolling hills

populated by unicorns, dragons and peacocks, and above them an eternally blue sky with white clouds drifting over it. The pictures were everywhere, in the rooms, along the corridors, on the courtyard walls. You saw them through every window (and there were many windows inside the castle). Painted views of a world that didn't exist. But the moist breath of the lake made paint flake off the stones, so that it seemed in many places as if someone had tried to wipe the painted lies off the walls.

Only from the towers, where the view was not interrupted by walls, oriels and roofs, could you see the world that really surrounded the castle, the great lake and the mountains that lay around it. Mo was immediately drawn to the battlements, where he could feel the sky above him and look at the world which fascinated him so much that he kept making his way deeper and deeper into it, even though it might not be any more real than the pictures on the walls. But Violante just wanted to see the rooms with windows looking out on painted worlds, rooms where her mother had played in the past.

She moved through the Castle as if she had come home, tenderly caressing the furniture, which was grey with dust, scrutinizing every piece of earthenware that she found under the cobwebs, and examining the pictures on the walls as closely as if they told her tales of her mother. 'This was the room where she and her sisters did their lessons. Look, those were their desks! They had a horrible tutor!' 'This was where my grandmother slept!' 'This was where they kept the hounds, this was the dovecote for the pigeons who carried their messages.'

The longer Mo followed her, the more it seemed to him that this painted world was exactly what Violante's shortsighted eyes wanted to see. Perhaps she felt safer in a world resembling the scenes in Balbulus's books – invented, easily controlled, timeless and unchanging, every corner of it familiar.

Would Meggie have liked to see painted unicorns from her window, he wondered, eternally green hills, clouds that were

always the same? No, he answered himself, Meggie would have climbed up to the towers like him.

‘Did your mother ever tell you if she was really happy here?’ Mo couldn’t keep the doubt out of his voice, and Violante heard it. The girlish softness that changed her face so much disappeared at once, and the Adderhead’s daughter was back.

‘Of course! Very happy. Until my father made my grandfather give him her hand in marriage and took her away to the Castle of Night!’ She looked at him defiantly, as if her mere gaze could force him to believe her – and to love this castle.

There was one room that didn’t let you forget the outside world. Mo first found it when he was exploring on his own, searching for some place where he wouldn’t feel that he was a prisoner again, if in a beautifully painted dungeon this time. Daylight dazzled him as he suddenly stepped into a hall in the west wing of the castle. It had so many windows that they turned the walls into lace. Light, reflected from the water of the lake, danced on the ceiling, and the mountains seemed to line up outside as if they wanted nothing more than to be seen through all those windows. The beauty of the view took Mo’s breath away, although it was a dark beauty, and his eyes instinctively went to the sombre mountain slopes in search of any trace of human beings. He filled his lungs with the cold air carried in on the wind, and did not see that he was not alone until he turned and looked south, to where Ombra lay somewhere beyond the mountains. Dustfinger was sitting in one of the windows, the wind in his hair, his face turned towards the cold sun.

‘The strolling players call it the Hall of a Thousand Windows,’ he said, without turning, and Mo wondered how long he had been sitting there. ‘They say that Violante’s mother and sisters had poor eyesight because their father would never let them look into the distance, for fear of what awaited them there. Daylight began to hurt their eyes. They couldn’t even make out the pictures on the walls of their rooms clearly any more, and a

physician who came here with a couple of the Motley Folk told Violante's grandfather that his daughters would go blind unless he let them see the real world now and then. So the Prince of Salt – that was what people called him, because he'd made a fortune in the salt trade – had these windows made in the walls and ordered his daughters to look out of them for an hour every day. But while they did so a minstrel had to tell them about the terrors of the outside world – the heartlessness and cruelty of human beings, disease running rife and hungry wolves – so that they'd never want to go out into it and leave their father.'

'What a strange story,' said Mo. As he went over to Dustfinger's side he could feel his longing for Roxane as strongly as if it were his own.

'It's only a story now,' said Dustfinger. 'But it all really happened, here in this place.' He blew a gentle breath into the cool air, and close beside them three girls were formed out of fire. They stood close together, staring into the distance, where the mountains were as blue as yearning.

'It's said they tried to run away with the strolling players several times. Their father tolerated the Motley Folk only because they brought him news from other princely courts. But neither the girls nor the strolling players ever got any further than the first trees. Their father had them caught and brought his daughters back to the castle. As for the strolling players, he had them tied up there –' Dustfinger pointed to a rock on the banks of the lake – 'and the girls had to stand at the window –' (the figures did exactly what Dustfinger described) – 'freezing cold and trembling with fear, until giants came and dragged the strolling players away.'

Mo couldn't take his eyes off the fiery girls. The flames depicted their fear and loneliness as expressively as Balbulus could have done with his brush. No, Violante's mother had not been happy in this castle, whatever her daughter said.

'What's he doing?'

Suddenly Violante was standing behind them. Brianna and Tullio were with her.

Dustfinger snapped his fingers, and the flames lost their human form and twined around the window like a fiery plant. 'Don't worry. There'll just be a little soot left on the stones, and for the moment,' he added, glancing at Brianna, who was staring into the flames as if enchanted, 'it looks beautiful, don't you think?'

It did. The fire surrounded the window with red leaves and flowers of gold. Tullio instinctively took a step towards it, but Violante roughly pulled him back to her side. 'Put it out, Fire-Dancer!' she ordered Dustfinger. 'This minute.'

Shrugging his shoulders, Dustfinger obeyed. A whisper, and the fire went out. Violante's anger did not impress him, and that alarmed the Adderhead's daughter. Mo could see it in her eyes.

'It did look beautiful, don't you agree?' he asked, passing his finger over the sooty sill. It was as if he could still see the three girls standing at the window.

'Fire is never beautiful,' said Violante with scorn. 'Have you ever seen anyone die by fire? They burn for a long time.'

She obviously knew what she was talking about. How old had she been when she first saw someone die at the stake, how old when she first saw a hanging? How much darkness could children bear before darkness became a part of them for ever?

'Come with me, Bluejay!' Violante turned abruptly. 'There's something I want to show you. Only you! Brianna, get some water and wash that soot off.'

Brianna hurried away without a word, but not without casting a quick glance at her father, who held Mo back as he was about to follow Her Ugliness.

'Beware of her!' he whispered. 'Princes' daughters have a weakness for mountebanks and robbers.'

‘Bluejay!’ Violante’s voice was sharp with impatience. ‘Where are you?’

Dustfinger painted a fiery heart on the floor.

Violante was waiting on the staircase in the tower as if afraid of the windows. Perhaps she liked shadows because she still felt the mark on her cheek from which her cruel nickname came. Meggie had been called very different pet names when she was little: ‘my pretty’, ‘sweetheart’, ‘honey’ ... Meggie had grown up in the certainty that the mere sight of her filled him with love. Presumably Violante’s mother had shown her daughter that kind of love, but everyone else had looked at her and shuddered, or felt pity at the most. Where had Violante hidden, as a child, from all those glances of dislike and all that pain? Had she taught her heart to despise everyone who could show the world a pretty face? Poor Adder’s daughter, thought Mo as he saw her standing on the dark staircase, so lonely in her dark heart ... no, Dustfinger was wrong. Violante loved nothing and no one, not even herself.

She hurried down the steps as if running away from her own shadow. She always walked fast and impatiently, picking up her long skirts as if cursing the clothes women had to wear in this world at every step she took.

‘Come with me. I want to show you something. My mother always told me the library of this castle was in the north wing, with the unicorn pictures. I don’t know when it was moved, or why, but see for yourself ... the tower guardroom, the scribe’s room, the women’s room,’ she whispered as she walked. ‘The bridge to the north tower, the bridge to the south tower, the aviary courtyard, the hounds’ courtyard ...’ She really did move around the castle as if she had lived in it for years.

How often had she studied the books describing this place? Mo could hear the lake as she led him through a courtyard containing empty cages, gigantic cages made of metalwork as elaborate as if the bars were meant to be substitute trees for the

birds inside. He heard water breaking on the stones, but the walls surrounding this courtyard were painted with beech and oak trees, and flocks of birds sitting in their branches: sparrows, larks, wild doves, nightingales and falcons, crossbills and robin redbreasts, woodpeckers and hummingbirds dipping their beaks into red flowers. A bluejay sat beside a swallow.

‘My mother and her sisters loved birds. So my grandfather didn’t just have them painted on the walls, he had live birds brought here from the most distant lands, and filled these cages with them. He had the cages covered in winter, but my mother crept in under the covers. Sometimes she would sit for hours in one of the cages, until the nursemaids found her and plucked the birds’ feathers from her hair.’

She hurried on. A covered passage under a gateway, another courtyard. Kennels, hunting scenes on the walls, and above it all the sound of the water of the lake, so far away and yet so close. Of course Violante’s mother loved birds, thought Mo. She wished she had wings too. No doubt she and her sisters dreamt of flying away when they climbed into the cages and waited for their fine dresses to be covered with feathers.

It saddened him to think of the three lonely girls, but all the same he would have loved to show Meggie the cages and the painted birds, the unicorns and dragons, the Hall of a Thousand Windows, even the Impregnable Bridge that seemed to be hovering over the lake when you looked down on it from above. You’ll tell Meggie about all this one day, he said to himself, as if just imagining it could make the words true.

Another staircase, another covered bridge like a tunnel suspended between the towers. The door at which Violante stopped was stained black, like all the doors in the castle. The wood had swelled, and she had to brace her shoulder against it to open it.

‘It’s terrible!’ she said, and she was right. Mo couldn’t make out much in the long room. Two narrow windows let in only a

little light and air, but even if he hadn't been able to see anything he would have smelt it. The books were stacked like firewood by the damp walls, and the cold air smelt so strongly of mould that he put his hand over his mouth and nose.

'Look at them!' Violante picked up the nearest book and held it out to him, tears in her eyes. 'They're all like that!'

Mo took the book from her hand and tried to open it, but the pages had stuck together in a single blackened, musty-smelling lump. Mould covered the cut edges of the pages like foam. The covers were eaten away. What he was holding wasn't a book any more – it was the corpse of a book, and for a moment Mo felt nausea as he thought that he had condemned the Book he had bound for the Adderhead to the same fate. Did it look as bad as this one by now? Hardly, or it would have killed the Adderhead long ago, and the White Women wouldn't be reaching out their hands to Meggie.

'I've looked at so many of them. Hardly any of them are in a better state! How can it have happened?'

Mo put the ruined book back with the others.

'Well, wherever the library originally was, I'm afraid there's no safe place for books in this castle. Even if your grandfather tried to forget the lake outside, it's still there. The air is so damp that the books started rotting, and since no one knew how to save them I suppose they were put in this room, in the hope that they'd dry out more quickly here than in the library. A bad mistake. They must have been worth a fortune.'

Violante pressed her lips together and passed her hand over the crumbling covers, as if stroking a dead pet's coat for the last time. 'My mother described them to me even more vividly than the rest of this castle! Luckily she took some to the Castle of Night with her, and then I took most of those to Ombrà. As soon as I arrived I asked my father-in-law to send for the other books too. After all, this castle had been empty for years. But who listens to an eight-year-old girl? "Forget the books, and the

castle where they stand,” that’s what he said whenever I asked him. “I’m not sending my men to a place like the Castle in the Lake, not for the finest books in the world. Haven’t you heard of the fish your grandfather bred in the lake, and the eternal mists? Not to mention the giants.” As if giants hadn’t disappeared from these mountains years ago! He was such a fool! A greedy, gluttonous fool!’ Anger took the sadness from her voice.

Mo looked around. The idea of the treasures that had once been hidden between all these wrecked covers nauseated him more than the stench of mould.

‘You can’t do anything for the books now, can you?’

He shook his head. ‘No. There’s no remedy for mould. Although you say that the Adderhead has found one. I don’t suppose you know what it is?’

‘Oh yes. But you won’t like it.’ Violante picked up one of the spoilt books. This one would still open, but the pages fell apart in her fingers. ‘He’s had the White Book dipped in fairy blood. They say that if that hadn’t worked he’d have tried human blood.’

Mo felt as if he could see the blank pages he had cut in the Castle of Night soaking up the blood. ‘That’s appalling!’ he said.

It obviously amused Violante that such a ridiculous piece of cruelty could shake him. ‘Apparently my father mixed the fairy blood with the blood of fire-elves so that it would dry more quickly,’ she went on, unmoved. ‘Their blood is very hot, did you know that? Hot as liquid fire.’

‘Indeed?’ Mo’s voice was hoarse with disgust. ‘I hope you aren’t planning to try the same remedy with these books. Believe me, it wouldn’t help them now.’

‘If you say so.’

Was he just imagining the disappointment in her voice?

He turned round. He didn't want to see the dead books any more. Nor did he want to think of those pages drenched in blood.

As he came through the doorway, Dustfinger moved away from the painted wall of the corridor. It was almost as if he were stepping out of a book again. 'We have a visitor, Silvertongue,' he said. 'Although not the one we were expecting.'

'Silvertongue?' Violante appeared in the open doorway. 'Why do you call him that?'

'Oh, it's a long story.' Dustfinger gave her a smile which she did not return. 'I assure you the name fits him at least as well as the one you give him. And he's had it very much longer.'

'Has he?' Violante looked at Dustfinger with barely concealed dislike. 'Is that what they call him among the dead too?'

Dustfinger turned and ran his finger over the gold-mocker sitting among the painted branches of a rose bush. 'No. No one goes by any name among the dead. We're all alike there. Mountebanks and princes. You'll find that out yourself some day.'

Violante's face froze, and once again it looked like her father's. 'My husband once came back from the dead too. But he didn't tell me mountebanks were so highly honoured there.'

'Did he tell you anything about it at all?' Dustfinger replied, looking so directly at Violante that she turned pale. 'I could tell you a long tale about your husband. I could tell you I've seen him twice among the dead. But I think you should greet your visitor now. He's not in a very good way.'

'Who is this visitor?'

Dustfinger plucked a fiery brush out of the air.

'Balbulus?' Violante looked at him in disbelief.

'Yes,' said Dustfinger. 'And the Piper has left the mark of your father's anger on him.'

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49

Masters New and Old

‘No problem!’ cried Butt the Hoopoe. ‘Any story worth its salt can handle a little shaking up.’

Salman Rushdie,
Hassan and the Sea of Stories

How his behind hurt! As if he'd never be able to sit on it again. Damn all this riding about the place. It was one thing to go through the streets of Ombra on horseback, his head held high, attracting envious glances. But it was no fun following the Adderhead's coach for hours in the dark, along rough paths where you were liable to break your neck the whole time.

For Orpheus's new master travelled only by night. As soon as dawn came he had his black tent pitched to hide there from the light of day, and only when the sun set did he heave his rotting

body back into the coach standing ready for him. It was drawn by two horses as black as the velvet that lined the coach. Orpheus had cast a surreptitious glance inside it the first time they stopped to rest. The Adder's crest was embroidered on the cushions in silver thread, and they looked much softer than the saddle he'd been sitting in for days. He wouldn't have minded a coach like that himself, but he had to ride behind it with Jacopo, Violante's horrible brat, who kept demanding something to eat or drink, and showed such doglike devotion to the Piper that he wore a tin nose over his own. It still surprised Orpheus that the Piper wasn't travelling with them. Well, of course – he'd let the Bluejay escape. Presumably the Adderhead had sent him back to the Castle of Night to punish him. But why, for heaven's sake, didn't his master have more than four dozen men-at-arms to escort them? Orpheus had counted them twice, but that was all. Did the Adderhead think this handful of men was enough against Violante's child soldiers, or did he still trust his daughter? If so, then the Silver Prince was either considerably more stupid than he was reputed to be, or the rot had attacked his brain, which might well mean that Mortimer would be playing the hero again and he, Orpheus, had backed the wrong side. A terrible idea, so he was very careful not to think of it too often.

They made such painfully slow progress in the heavy coach that Oss could keep up with the horses on foot. Cerberus had been left behind in Ombra. The Adderhead, too, thought keeping dogs was a privilege of the nobility ... it really was high time the rules of this world were rewritten.

'Slow as snails!' grumbled one of the men-at-arms behind him. Those fellows stank to high heaven, as if competing with their master's odour. 'You wait and see, by the time we reach that damn castle the Bluejay will have flown again.' Idiots in armour. They still hadn't realized that the Bluejay had ridden to Ombra Castle with a plan in mind, and that plan had not yet been put into practice.

Ah, they were stopping at last. What a relief to his poor bones! The sky was still black as pitch, but presumably Thumbling had spotted a fairy dancing at the approach of dawn in spite of the cold.

Thumbling ...

The Adderhead's new bodyguard could teach anyone the meaning of fear. He was as thin as if Death had taken him once already, and the scaly snake from his master's crest was tattooed across his larynx, so that when he spoke it writhed on his skin as if it were alive. A very unsettling sight, but luckily Thumbling didn't talk much. He did not owe his name to his stature. Indeed, Thumbling was rather taller than Orpheus, not that it was likely anyone in this world knew the fairy tale of the same name and its tiny central character. No, this Thumbling apparently got his name from the cruel things he could do with his thumbs.

Orpheus hadn't found anything about him in Fenoglio's book, so presumably he was one of those characters who – if Fenoglio himself was to be believed – had been hatched out by the story itself, like midge larvae in a marshy pond. Thumbling dressed like a peasant, but his sword was better than the Piper's, and it was said that, like Silvernose, he had no sense of smell, which was why the two of them could be near the Adderhead without being overcome by nausea, unlike everyone else.

Lucky for them, thought Orpheus as he slid off his horse, groaning with relief.

'Rub it down!' he ordered Oss testily. 'And then pitch my tent, and jump to it.' Orpheus thought his bodyguard extremely foolish since he had set eyes on Thumbling.

Orpheus's tent was not particularly large. He could hardly stand up in it, and it was so cramped that he almost knocked it down when he turned around, but he hadn't been able to read himself a better one in a hurry, even though he had searched all his books for a rather grander version. His books ... well, they

were his now, anyway. Formerly the property of the library of Ombra Castle, but no one had stopped Orpheus when he'd helped himself to them.

Books.

How excited he had been, standing in the Laughing Prince's library. He had been so sure that he'd find at least one book there containing words by Fenoglio. And he had, indeed, come upon a book of Bluejay songs on the very first lectern. His fingers had been shaking as he freed the book from its chain (the locks were easily picked; he knew how to do these things). Got you now, Mortimer, he had thought. I'll knead you into shape like dough. You won't know who and where you are once I get my tongue around your robber's name! He had been all the more painfully disappointed when he read the first words. Oh, those leaden sounds, those badly-rhymed lines! Fenoglio couldn't have written any of the songs in that book. Where were the old man's songs? Violante took them with her, you fool, he told himself. Why didn't you think of that before?

The disappointment still hurt. But who said only Fenoglio's words could come alive in this world? Weren't all books ultimately related? After all, the same letters filled them, just arranged in a different order. Which meant that, in a certain way, every book was contained in every other!

However that might be, what Orpheus had read so far during those endless hours in the saddle was not, unfortunately, very promising. It seemed that there wasn't a single storyteller in this world who understood his art, or at least not in the Laughing Prince's library. What a pitiful collection of beautifully handwritten tedium, what wooden babbling! And the characters! Not even *his* voice would bring them to life.

Originally Orpheus had intended to impress the Adderhead with a sample of his skill the next time they stopped to rest, but he still hadn't found anything that tasted better on his tongue than dry paper. Damn it all!

Of course the Adderhead's tent was already pitched. Thumbling always sent a few servants on ahead so that his master could stumble out of the coach and straight into it. It was a fabric palace, the dark lengths of cloth embroidered with silver snakes shimmering in the moonlight as if thousands of slugs had been crawling over the material.

Suppose he summons you now, Orpheus said to himself. Didn't you promise him entertainment? He still heard the Milksop's malicious words only too clearly: *My brother-in-law doesn't like to have his expectations disappointed.*

Orpheus shivered. He sat down under a tree, feeling wretched, lit a candle and fished another book out of the saddlebags, while Oss went on struggling with the tent.

Children's stories! Oh, for heaven's sake! Damn it, damn it, damn it ... or not? Wait a minute! This sounded familiar! Orpheus's heartbeat quickened. Yes, these were Fenoglio's words, no doubt about it.

'That's my book!' Small fingers snatched the book from Orpheus's hands. There stood Jacopo, lips pouting, brows drawn together above his eyes – probably in imitation of his grandfather. He wasn't wearing the tin nose. Maybe it had become rather a nuisance after a while.

With difficulty, Orpheus resisted the temptation to tug the book out of those slender hands. Not a clever move. Be nice to the little devil, Orpheus!

'Jacopo!' He gave him a broad and slightly deferential smile, the kind a prince's son would like, even if the prince in question was dead. 'This is your book? Then I'm sure you know who wrote it, don't you?'

Jacopo stared darkly at him. 'Tortoise-Face.'

Tortoise-Face. What a fabulous name for Fenoglio.

'Do you like his stories?'

Jacopo shrugged. 'I like the songs about the Bluejay better, but my mother won't let me have them.'

'That's not very nice of her, is it?' Orpheus stared at the book that Jacopo was clutching so possessively to his chest. He felt his hands sweating with desire for it. Fenoglio's words ... suppose the words in that book worked as well as the words in *Inkheart* itself?

'How would it be, Jacopo ...' (oh, how happily he could have wrung his stupid princely neck!), 'how would it be if I told you a few robber stories, and you lent me that book in return?'

'Can you tell stories? I thought you sold unicorns and dwarves.'

'I can do that too!' And I'll have you impaled on a unicorn's horn if you don't give me the book this minute, thought Orpheus, hiding his savage reflections behind an even broader smile.

'What do you want the book for? It's for children. Only for children.'

Horrible little know-all. 'I want to look at the pictures.'

Jacopo opened the book and leafed through the parchment pages. 'They're boring. Just animals and fairies and brownies. I can't stand brownies. They stink, and they look like Tullio.' He looked at Orpheus. 'What will you give me if I lend it to you? Do you have any silver?'

Silver. It ran in the family – although Jacopo resembled his dead father far more than his grandfather.

'Of course.' Orpheus put his hand into the bag at his belt. Just you wait, princeling, he thought. If this book can do what I suspect it can, I'll think up a few nasty surprises for you.

Jacopo put out his hand, and Orpheus dropped a coin bearing his grandfather's head into it.

The little hand stayed open, demanding more. 'I want three.'

Orpheus snarled with annoyance, and Jacopo clutched the book a little more firmly.

Greedy little bastard. Orpheus dropped two more coins into the child's hand, and Jacopo was quick to close his fingers over them. 'That's for one day.'

'One day?'

Oss trudged towards them. His toes were sticking out of his boots; he was always needing new boots for his elephantine feet. Too bad. Let him go barefoot for a while.

'Your tent is ready, my lord.'

Jacopo stuffed the coins into the bag at his own belt, and held the book out to Orpheus with a gracious expression.

'Three silver coins, three days!' said Orpheus, taking the book. 'And now get out before I change my mind.'

Jacopo ducked, but the next moment he remembered whose grandson he was.

'That's no way to talk to me, Four-Eyes!' he cried shrilly, treading on Orpheus's foot so hard that he screamed. The soldiers who were sitting under the trees, freezing in the cold, laughed, and Jacopo stalked away like a shrunken copy of the Adderhead.

Orpheus felt the blood shoot to his face. 'What kind of bodyguard are you?' he snapped at Oss. 'Can't you even protect me from a six-year-old?'

With that, he limped towards his tent.

Oss had lit an oil lamp and spread a bearskin on the cold forest floor, but Orpheus missed his own house the moment he stepped inside. 'All because of Mortimer and his stupid robber games!' he grumbled as he sat down on the bearskin in a bad temper. 'I'll send him to hell, and Dustfinger with him. From all I hear, those two seem to be inseparable these days. And if there isn't any hell in this world, well, I'll write one especially for them. Even Dustfinger won't like that kind of fire!'

Write ... he avidly opened the book he had bargained for with that avaricious little devil. Bears, brownies, fairies ... the child was right, these were children's stories. It wouldn't be easy to read something out of them to tempt the Adderhead, who was sure to summon him soon, for who else was going to help him pass the sleepless night?

More brownies. The old man seemed to have a soft spot for them. A very sentimental story about a glass woman in love ... another featuring a nymph madly in love with a prince ... for heaven's sake, even Jacopo could hardly be expected to take much interest in that. Was a robber at least mentioned somewhere? Or, if not that, a bluejay calling? Yes, that would do it: he could step into the Adderhead's tent and, with just a few words, read the enemy he'd been hunting so long into his presence. But instead he found woodpeckers, nightingales, even a talking sparrow – no bluejay. Curse it, curse it, curse it! He hoped his three silver coins had been a good investment. *Nose-Nipper* ... hmm, that at least sounded like a creature he could use to get his own back on the boy. But wait a moment! *There, where the forest was at its darkest* ... Orpheus's lips formed the words soundlessly ... *and where not even the brownies ventured out to search for mushrooms* ...

'This camp is a very uncomfortable place to stay, master!' Ironstone was suddenly there beside him, looking gloomy. 'How long do you think we'll be travelling?'

The glass man was getting greyer every day. Perhaps he missed quarrelling with that treacherous brother of his. Or maybe it was because he kept catching woodlice and maggots and eating them with obvious relish.

'Don't disturb me!' Orpheus snapped at him. 'Can't you see I'm reading? And what's that leg clinging to your jacket? Haven't I told you not to eat insects? Do you want me to chase you away into the forest to join the wild glass men?'

‘No. No, I really don’t! I won’t let another word pass my lips, Your Grace – and no insects either!’ Ironstone bowed three times. (How Orpheus loved his servility!) ‘Just one more question. Is that the book that was stolen from you?’

‘No, unfortunately – only its little brother,’ replied Orpheus without looking up. ‘And now for heaven’s sake shut up!’

... and where not even the brownies ventured out to search for mushrooms, he read on, lived the blackest of all shadows, the worst of all nameless terrors. Night-Mare it was now called, but once it had borne a human name, for Night-Mares are human souls so evil that the White Women cannot wash the wickedness from their hearts, and send them back again ...

Orpheus raised his head. ‘Well, well, what a dark story!’ he murmured. ‘What was the old man thinking of? Had that ghastly imp annoyed him so much that he set out to sing him a very special lullaby? This sounds rather as if Jacopo’s grandfather might like it too. Yes.’ Once again he bent over the pages on which Balbulus had painted a shadow with black fingers reaching through the letters on the page. ‘Oh yes, fabulous!’ he whispered. ‘Ironstone, bring me pen and paper – and quick, or I’ll feed you to one of the horses.’

The glass man obeyed eagerly, and Orpheus set to work. Half a sentence stolen here, a few words there, a snippet plucked from the next page to link them. Fenoglio’s words. Written with a rather lighter touch than in *Inkheart* – you almost thought you could hear the old man chuckling – but the music was the same. So why shouldn’t the words from this story act like those from the other book – the one so shamefully stolen from him?

‘Yes. Yes, that sounds just like the old man’s work!’ whispered Orpheus as the paper soaked up the ink. ‘But it needs a little more colour ...’ He was leafing through the illuminated pages, looking for the right words, when the glass man suddenly gave a shrill scream and scurried into hiding behind his hand.

There was a magpie in the opening of the tent.

Alarmed, Ironstone clutched Orpheus's sleeve (he was brave only when dealing with smaller specimens of his own kind), and Orpheus's hope that this might be just an ordinary magpie was dashed as soon as the bird opened her beak.

'Get out!' she spat at the glass man, and Ironstone scurried outside on his thin, spidery legs, although the Adderhead's men threw acorns and fairy-nuts at him.

Mortola. Of course Orpheus had known she'd turn up again sooner or later, but why couldn't it have been later? A magpie, he thought as she hopped towards him. If I could turn myself into an animal or a bird I'd make sure to choose something more impressive. How bedraggled she looked. Presumably a marten had been after her, or a fox. A pity it hadn't eaten her.

'What are you doing here?' she snapped. 'Did I say anything about offering your services to the Adderhead?'

She sounded completely crazy, apart from the fact that her harsh voice lost all its terrors when it came out of a yellow beak. Your story's finished, Mortola, thought Orpheus. Over. Whereas mine is only just beginning ...

'Why are you sitting staring at me like that? Did he believe what you told him about his daughter and the Bluejay? Well, come on, out with it!' She pecked angrily at a beetle that had wandered into the tent, crunching it up so noisily that Orpheus felt sick.

'Oh, yes, yes,' he said, irritated. 'Of course he believed me. I was very convincing.'

'Good.' The magpie fluttered up on to the books that Orpheus had stolen from the library and peered down on what he had been writing. 'What's all this? Has the Adderhead ordered a unicorn from you too?'

'No, no. That's nothing. Just a ... er ... a story I'm supposed to be writing for his pest of a grandson.' Orpheus placed his

hand over the words, as if by chance.

‘What about the White Book?’ Mortola preened her ruffled feathers. ‘Have you found out where the Adderhead is hiding it? He must have it with him!’

‘Death and the devil, of course not! Do you think the Adderhead carries it about with him publicly?’ This time Orpheus didn’t even try to keep the contempt out of his voice, and Mortola pecked his hand so hard that he screeched.

‘I don’t like your tone, Moonface! He must have it somewhere, so look for it, seeing that you’re here. I can’t take care of everything.’

‘When did you ever take care of anything?’ Oh, why don’t I wring her skinny neck, he said to himself, wiping the blood from the back of his hand. The way my father used to kill chickens and pigeons.

‘Is that any way to speak to me?’ The magpie pecked at his hand again, but this time Orpheus snatched it away in time. ‘Do you think I’ve just been perching on a branch doing nothing? I’ve rid the world of the Black Prince and made sure that his men will help me in future, not the Bluejay.’

‘Really? The Prince is dead?’ Orpheus took a great deal of trouble to sound unimpressed. That would hurt Fenoglio. The old man was ridiculously proud of his character. ‘What about the children he stole? Where are they?’

‘In a cave northeast of Ombra. The moss-women call it the Giants’ Chamber. There are still a few robbers with them, and some women. It’s a stupid hiding place, but since the Adderhead thought it was a good idea to send his brother-in-law to look for them, the children are probably safe there for a good while yet. Folk say even a rabbit can outwit that man.’

Interesting! And wasn’t that a piece of news that could convince the Adderhead of his own usefulness?

‘What about the Bluejay’s wife and daughter? Are they there too?’

‘Certainly.’ Mortola hissed as if something were stuck in her throat. ‘I was going to poison the little witch as well and send her after the Prince, but her mother chased me away. She knows too much about me, far too much!’

This was getting better and better.

But Mortola could read his thoughts on his face. ‘Don’t look so stupidly pleased with yourself! You’re not to tell the Adderhead a word about any of this. They’re both mine. I’m not leaving them to the Silver Prince this time, just for him to let them go again, understand?’

‘Of course! My lips are sealed!’ Orpheus immediately assumed his most innocent expression. ‘What about the others – the robbers who are going to help you?’

‘They’re following you. They’ll lie in ambush for the Adder tomorrow night. They think it’s their own idea, but I planted it in their silly heads! Where can the Book fall into their hands more easily than in the middle of the forest? Snapper’s staged hundreds of such attacks in the past, and he won’t have to deal with the Piper. The stupid Adder has left his best watchdog behind – I suppose to punish him for letting the Bluejay escape. But he’s only cutting into his own rotting flesh, and perhaps the Magpie will redeem her own son from Death with his corpse as early as tomorrow. It’s a pity that if I do I won’t see the White Women take the bookbinder away, but that can’t be helped. Take him away they will, and this time they won’t let him go again. Who knows? Perhaps Death will be so pleased to have both the Adderhead and the Bluejay that the White Book will be forgotten. Then I can write my son’s name in it and never fear for him again!’

She was talking feverishly, faster and faster with every sentence, cackling as if she would choke on the words if she didn’t get them out fast enough.

‘Hide in the bushes when they attack!’ she added. ‘I don’t want Snapper killing you too by mistake. I may need you yet if the fool happens to fail!’

She really does still trust you, Orpheus, he thought. He could almost have laughed out loud. What had happened to Mortola’s mind? Did she think of nothing but worms and beetles now? A poor prospect for her, thought Orpheus, and a very good one for me.

‘Good. Excellent,’ he said, while his brain thought swiftly of the best way to use all this information. Only one thing was perfectly clear: if the White Book fell into Mortola’s hands, he himself would have lost the game. Death would take the Adderhead, Mortola would write her son’s name in the White Book, and he himself wouldn’t even get back the book that Dustfinger had stolen from him, to say nothing of immortal life! He would be left with nothing but the stories Fenoglio had written for a spoilt child. No, there was no alternative, he must go on backing the Adderhead.

‘Why are you standing there gaping like a mooncalf?’ Mortola’s voice sounded more like a bird’s hoarse cry with every word.

‘My lord!’ Oss put his head into the tent, looking alarmed. ‘The Adderhead wants to see you. They say he’s in a terrible temper.’

‘I’m coming.’ Orpheus almost trod on the magpie’s tail feathers as he stumbled out of the tent. She hopped aside with an angry cackle.

‘Horrible creature!’ grunted Oss, kicking out at her. ‘You want to shoo it away, my lord. My mother says magpies are thieves reborn.’

‘I don’t like it either,’ whispered Orpheus. ‘I tell you what, why not wring its neck while I’m gone?’

Oss’s mouth twisted in an unpleasant smile. He liked such tasks. Perhaps he wasn’t such a bad bodyguard after all. No, he

wasn't.

Orpheus passed his hand once more over his hair (old man's hair, they called it here; no one else in Ombra was such a pale blond) and made for the Adderhead's tent. He wouldn't be able to read the Bluejay here for him, and whatever was hidden in Jacopo's book must wait until his audience with the Silver Prince was over, but thanks to Mortola he had something else to offer now.

The Adderhead's tent was as black beneath the trees as if night had left a piece of itself behind there. And suppose it had? Night was always kinder to you than day, Orpheus, he told himself as Thumbling pushed back the dark cloth of the tent flap, his face expressionless. Didn't darkness and silence make it so much easier to dream the world to your own taste? Yes, perhaps he ought to make it always night in this world, once he had *Inkheart* back again ...

'Your Highness!' Orpheus bowed low as the Adderhead's face emerged from the darkness like a distorted moon. 'I bring news I've just learnt from listening to the wind. I think you'll like it ...'





50

Lazy Old Man

One day God felt he ought to give his workshop a springclean ... It was amazing what ragged bits and pieces came out from under his workbench, as he swept. Beginnings of creatures, bits that looked useful but had seemed wrong, ideas that he'd mislaid and forgotten ... There was even a tiny lump of sun. He scratched his head. What could be done with all this rubbish?

Ted Hughes,
Leftovers, from The Dreamfighter

Here she came again! Elinor Loredan! The name sounded almost as if he'd thought her up himself. Cursing, Fenoglio pulled the blanket over his face. Wasn't it bad enough that she was a know-all, a bluestocking, and stubborn as a mule?

Did she have to be an early riser too? He supposed day was just beginning to dawn outside.

‘Hm, that doesn’t look particularly inspired!’ Her eyes had gone straight to the blank sheet of paper lying beside him. How horribly bright and cheerful she sounded. ‘Don’t they say the Muses’ kisses are sweetest early in the morning? I think I read that somewhere.’

Huh. As if she knew anything about kissing – and hadn’t he earned his sleep, when there wasn’t a decent drop of wine to be had in this wretched cave? Hadn’t he just saved the Black Prince’s life? Very well, the Prince’s legs were still rather weak, and he wasn’t eating much, as Minerva kept saying with concern. But then, all those children had to be fed, not an easy task at this time of year, and the little ones were hungry the whole time – when they weren’t asking him or Darius for a story, Farid for some tricks with fire, or Meggie for a few songs about the Bluejay. She sang them better than Battista by now.

Perhaps that’s something I ought to do, thought Fenoglio, ostentatiously turning his back on Signora Loredan. Write some more game here for us to hunt – something easily brought down, with plenty of meat on it and a good flavour.

‘Fenoglio!’ She’d actually pulled the blanket off him! This was incredible!

Rosenquartz put his head out of the pocket where he had taken to sleeping, and rubbed his eyes.

‘Good morning, Rosenquartz. Get some paper out and sharpen the pens.’

That tone of voice! Just like a hospital nurse! Fenoglio sat up with a groan. He really was too old to be sleeping on the floor of a damp cave! ‘That’s *my* glass man, and he does what *I* tell him to do!’ he grunted, but before he knew it Rosenquartz was scurrying past him with a syrupy-sweet smile on his pale pink lips.

What by all the ink-devils was he playing at? The glass-headed traitor! How eagerly he did as she told him, whereas if he, Fenoglio, asked Rosenquartz for something it didn't arrive half so quickly.

'Wonderful!' whispered Signora Loredan. 'Thank you, Rosenquartz.'

Elinor. It's not the name I'd have given her, thought Fenoglio as he forced his feet into his boots, shivering. Something more warlike would fit her much better ... Penthesilea or Boadicea or some such Amazon ... heavens, it was cold in this cave too! Can't you change the weather somehow, Fenoglio? Could he?

As he blew on his cold hands his uninvited visitor held out a steaming mug to him. 'Here you are. Doesn't taste particularly good, but it's hot. Coffee made from tree bark – you know, Rosenquartz really is a delightful glass man!' she whispered to him in a confidential tone. 'Jasper is very nice too, but so shy. And then there's that pink hair!'

Flattered, Rosenquartz ran his fingers over it. Glass men's ears were certainly as keen as any owl's, which was why – even with their fragile limbs – they made such good spies. Fenoglio could cheerfully have stuffed the vain little creature into his empty wineskin.

He took a sip of the hot brew – it really did taste nasty – got to his feet, and dipped his face in the basin of water that Minerva always left ready for him in the evening. Did he just imagine it, or was there a thin layer of ice on the surface?

'You really don't understand the first thing about writing, Loredan!' he growled. That was it, Loredan! That's what he'd call her in future. It suited her much better than the flowery 'Elinor'. 'For one thing, early in the morning is the worst possible time. The brain is like a wet sponge at that hour. And for another, real writing is a question of staring into space and waiting for the right ideas.'

‘Well, you certainly are very good at staring into space!’ Oh, what a sharp tongue she had. ‘Next you’ll be telling me that tipping brandy and mead down your throat encourages the flow of ideas too.’

Had Rosenquartz just nodded in agreement? He’d chase him out into the forest, where his wild cousins would teach him to eat snails and beetles.

‘Well then, Loredan, I’m sure you’ve known all along how this story ought to turn out! Let me guess: I suppose a frozen sparrow told you the ending yesterday when you were sitting outside the cave, gazing at my forest and my fairies, totally beguiled by them!’ Damn it, another tear in his trousers. And Battista had hardly any thread left for mending clothes.

‘Inkweaver?’ Despina came round the wall that allowed him, for a few precious moments, to forget where he was. ‘Do you want any breakfast?’

Dear, kind Minerva. She still looked after him as if they were back in her house in Ombra. Fenoglio sighed. The good old days ...

‘No thank you, Despina,’ he replied, looking sideways at his other visitor. ‘Tell your mother that unfortunately someone ruined my appetite first thing today.’

Despina and Elinor exchanged a glance that could only be called conspiratorial. Good heavens, were even Minerva’s children on Loredan’s side now?

‘Resa has been gone for two days, not to mention Snapper, but what was the good of leaving you the book if you’re just going to sleep the day away or drink bad wine with Battista?’

Dear God, how delightful this world had been when he hadn’t had that voice ringing in his ears the whole time!

‘You owe it to Mortimer to give him a few words to help him. Who else is going to do it? The Black Prince is too weak, and Mortimer’s poor daughter is just waiting for you to give her

something to read aloud at long last. But oh, no, no. *It's too cold, the wine is bad, the children make too much noise, how's anyone supposed to write?* You don't run out of words when it comes to complaining!'

There! Rosenquartz was nodding again! I'll mix soup in his sand, thought Fenoglio, so much soup that he writhes with stomach cramps like the Black Prince – and I won't write a single word to cure him!

'Fenoglio, are you listening to me?' She was looking at him as reproachfully as a teacher asking where his homework was!

The book, yes. Resa had left it here for him. So what use was that supposed to be? It just reminded him how easy he had once found storytelling, before he put every word down on paper knowing that it could become reality.

'It can't be all that difficult! Mortimer has done almost all the work for you in advance! He's going to pretend to the Adderhead that he can heal the Book, then Violante will distract her father's attention, and Mortimer will write the three words in it. Maybe afterwards there'll be a duel with the Piper – that kind of thing always reads well – I suppose the Fire-Dancer will put on a show too, although personally I still don't like him – and yes, you could have Resa playing a part as well. She could keep that horrible Snapper occupied, I don't know just how, but I'm sure you'll think of something ...'

'Be quiet!' thundered Fenoglio in such a loud voice that Rosenquartz, terrified, took refuge behind the inkwell. 'What outrageous nonsense! That's just typical. Readers and their ideas! Yes, Mortimer's plan sounds really good. Plain and simple, but good. He overcomes the Adderhead with Violante's help, writes the three words, Adderhead dead, Bluejay saved, Violante ruler of Ombra – oh yes, it *sounds wonderful*. I tried writing it like that last night. It doesn't work! Dead words! This story doesn't like taking an easy path. It has other ideas, I can smell that in the air. But what are they? I brought the Piper into

it, I gave Dustfinger his fair share of the action, but then – something or other was missing. *Someone* or other was missing! Someone who's going to thwart Mortimer's fine plan with a vengeance. Snapper? No, he's too stupid. But who? Sootbird?'

She was looking at him so anxiously. Well, well. At last she understood. But the next moment she was as defiant as ever. It was a wonder she didn't stamp her foot like a child. She *was* a child, disguised as a rather stout middle-aged woman.

'But that's all nonsense! You're the author. You, and no one else.'

'Oh yes? So why is Cosimo dead, then? Did I write about Mortimer binding the book in a way that would leave the Adderhead rotting alive? No. Was it my idea to make Snapper jealous of him, and Her Ugliness suddenly want to kill her father? Definitely not. I just planted this story, but it's growing the way it wants to, and everyone expects me to know in advance what kind of flowers it will have!'

Good God, that incredulous look. As if he'd been talking about Santa Claus. But finally she thrust her chin out (it was quite an imposing chin), and that never boded well.

'Excuses! Nothing but excuses! You can't think of anything, and Resa's on the way to that castle. Suppose the Adderhead gets there long before she does? Suppose he doesn't trust his daughter, and Mortimer is dead before—'

'And suppose Mortola is back, as Resa says?' Fenoglio brusquely interrupted her. 'Suppose Snapper kills Mortimer because he's jealous of the Bluejay? Suppose Violante hands Mortimer over to her father after all, because she can't bear to be rejected by yet another man? What about the Piper, what about Violante's spoilt son, what about all that?' His voice grew so loud that Rosenquartz hid under his blanket.

'Stop shouting!' Suddenly Signora Loredan sounded unusually subdued. 'Poor Rosenquartz's head will be splitting.'

‘No, it won’t, because his head is as empty as a sucked-out snail’s shell. Mine, on the other hand, has to think about difficult problems, matters of life and death – but it’s my glass man that gets your sympathy, and you drag me out of bed after I’ve been lying awake half the night straining my ears trying to get this story to tell me where it wants to go!’

She fell silent. She actually fell silent. She bit her surprisingly feminine lower lip and plucked a few burrs off the dress that Minerva had given her, lost in thought. That dress was always picking up dead leaves, burrs and rabbit droppings – and no wonder, the way she kept wandering around the forest. Elinor Loredan certainly loved his world, though of course she would never admit it – and she understood it almost as well as he did.

‘How ... how would it be if you could at least gain us a little time?’ She still sounded far less sure of herself than usual. ‘Time to think, time to write! Time that might really give Resa a chance to warn Mortimer of Snapper and that magpie. Perhaps a wheel could come off the Adderhead’s coach. He travels by coach, doesn’t he?’

Well, yes. Not such a stupid idea. Why hadn’t he thought of it himself?

‘I can try,’ he growled.

‘Oh, wonderful.’ She smiled with relief – and was immediately more self-confident again. ‘I’ll ask Minerva to make you some nicer tea,’ she added, looking back over her shoulder. ‘Tea is better for thinking than wine, I’m sure. And don’t be cross with Rosenquartz.’

The glass man smiled at her in a nauseating way, and Fenoglio gave him a slight nudge with his foot that sent him over on his back.

‘Stir the ink, you slimy-tongued traitor!’ he said, as Rosenquartz scrambled to his feet, looking offended.

Minerva really did bring him some tea. It even had a little lemon in it, and outside the cave the children were laughing as

if everything in the world was all right. Well, *make* it all right, Fenoglio, he told himself. Loredan has a point. You're still the author of this story. The Adderhead is on his way to the Castle in the Lake, where Mortimer is waiting. The Bluejay is preparing for his finest song. Write it for him! Write Mortimer's part to its end. He's playing it with as much conviction as if he'd been born with the name you gave him. The words are obeying you again. You have the book. Orpheus is forgotten. This is still your story, so give it a good ending!

Yes. He'd do it. And Signora Loredan would finally be left speechless and show him the respect she owed him. But first he had to delay the Adderhead (and forget that had been Elinor's idea in the first place).

Outside the children were shouting noisily. Rosenquartz was whispering to Jasper, who was sitting among the freshly-sharpened pens and watching him, wide-eyed. Minerva brought some soup, and Elinor peeped over the wall as if he couldn't see her there. But soon Fenoglio was beyond noticing any of that. The words were carrying him away as they had in the past, letting him ride on their inky backs, leaving him blind and deaf to his surroundings, until he heard only the crunch of coach wheels on frozen ground and the sound of black-painted wood splitting. Soon both glass men were dipping pens in the ink for him, the words came so fast. Splendid words. Words worthy of Fenoglio. He'd quite forgotten how the letters on the page could intoxicate you. No wine could compete with them ...

'Inkweaver!'

Fenoglio raised his head, irritated. He was already deep in the mountains, on his way to the Castle in the Lake, aware of the Adderhead's bloated flesh as if it were his own.

Battista stood there, concern in his face, and the mountains vanished. Fenoglio was back in the cave, surrounded by robbers and hungry children. What was the matter? The Black Prince hadn't taken a turn for the worse again, had he?

‘Doria is back from one of his scouting expeditions. The boy’s dead on his feet; he must have been running half the night. He says the Milksop is on his way here, and he knows about the cave. No one has any idea who told him.’ Battista rubbed his pockmarked cheeks. ‘They have hounds with them. Doria says they’ll be here this evening. That means we must leave.’

‘Leave? And go where?’

Where could they take all the children, many of them half crazed with homesickness by now? Fenoglio saw from Battista’s face that the robber had no answer to that question either.

Well, so now what would clever Signora Loredan say? How was anyone supposed to write in these circumstances? ‘Tell the Prince I’ll be with him right away.’

Battista nodded. As he turned, Despina pushed past him. Her little face was anxious. Children know at once when something’s wrong. They are used to having to guess what grown-ups don’t tell them.

‘Come here!’ Fenoglio beckoned her over, while Rosenquartz fanned the words he had just written with a maple leaf. Fenoglio sat Despina on his lap and stroked her fair hair. Children ... he forgave his villains so much, but since the Piper had started hunting children down, there was only one ending he wanted to write to the man’s story, and it was a bloody one. If only he’d already written it! But it would have to wait now, like the song of the Bluejay. Where could they take the children? Think, Fenoglio, think!

He desperately rubbed his lined brow. Heavens, no wonder thinking dug such deep furrows in your face.

‘Rosenquartz!’ he told the glass man sharply. ‘Find Meggie. Tell her she must read what I’ve written, even though it isn’t quite finished. It’ll have to do.’

The glass man scurried off so fast that he knocked over the wine Battista had brought, and the covers of Fenoglio’s bed were stained as if soaked in blood. The book! He snatched it out

from under the damp fabric in concern. *Inkheart*. He still liked that title. What would happen if *these* pages were moistened? Would his whole world begin to rot? But the paper was dry, only one corner of the binding was slightly damp. Fenoglio rubbed it with his sleeve.

‘What’s that?’ Despina took the book from him. Of course – where would she ever have seen a book before? She hadn’t grown up in a castle or a rich merchant’s house.

‘This is a thing that has stories in it,’ said Fenoglio.

He heard Elfbane calling the children together, the alarmed voices of the women, the first sounds of weeping. Despina listened anxiously too, but then she stared at the book again.

‘Stories?’ She leafed through the pages as if expecting the words to fall out. ‘What stories? Have you told them to us already?’

‘Not this one.’ Fenoglio gently took the book from her hand and stared at the page where she had opened it. His own words looked back at him, written so long ago that they sounded like someone else’s work ...

‘What kind of a story is it? Will you tell it to me?’

He stared at his old words, written by a different Fenoglio, a Fenoglio whose heart had been so much younger, so much lighter – and not so vain, no doubt Signora Loredan would add.

Great marvels lay north of Ombra. Hardly any of its inhabitants had ever set eyes on those wonders, but the songs of the strolling players told tales about them and when the peasants wanted to escape their toil in the fields for a few precious moments they would imagine themselves standing on the banks of the lake which, so it was said, the giants used as their mirror. They would picture the nymphs thought to live in it rising from the water and taking them away to castles made of pearls and mother-of-pearl. As the sweat ran down their faces they would sing softly, songs that told of snow-white mountains and of the nests human beings had built in a mighty tree when the giants had begun stealing their children.

Nests ... a mighty tree ... stealing their children. Good heavens, that was it!

Fenoglio picked Jasper up and put him on Despina's shoulder. 'Jasper will take you back to your mother,' he said, and strode away past her. 'I must go to the Prince.'

Signora Loredan is right, he thought as he made his way swiftly through the crowd of excited children, weeping mothers and robbers standing around helplessly. You're a foolish old man. Your befuddled brain doesn't even remember your own stories any more! Orpheus may well know more about your own world than you do by now.

But his vain self, lurking somewhere between his forehead and his breastbone, answered back at once. *How are you supposed to remember them all, Fenoglio? There are just too many of them. Your imagination is inexhaustible.*

Yes. Yes, he was indeed a vain old man. He admitted it. But he had very good reasons for his vanity.





51

The Wrong Helpers

We never know we go – when we are going
We jest and shut the door;
Fate following behind us blots it,
And we accost no more.

Emily Dickinson,
Collected Poems

Mortola was perching in a poison yew, surrounded by needles nearly as black as her plumage. Her left wing hurt. Orpheus's servant had almost broken it with his meaty fingers, and only her beak had saved her. She'd pecked his ugly nose until it bled, but she hardly knew how she had managed to flutter out of the tent. She had been able to fly only short distances since then, but even worse, she couldn't change back from her bird shape, although it was a long time since she

had swallowed any of the seeds. How long since she had taken human form? Two days, three days? The magpie didn't count days, the magpie thought of nothing but beetles and worms (ah, plump, pale worms!), winter and wind and the fleas in her feathers.

The last person she had seen when she was in human shape was Snapper. And yes, he would follow the good advice she had given him in a whisper, and attack the Adderhead in the forest, but all the thanks he'd given her was to call her a damn witch, and try to seize her so that his men could kill her. She had bitten his hand, hissed at the others until they retreated, and there in the bushes she had swallowed the seeds again so that she could fly to Orpheus – only to have his servant almost break her wings! *Peck his eyes out! Peck all their eyes out! Dig your claws into their stupid faces!*

Mortola uttered a pitiful cry, and the robbers looked up at her as if she were announcing their death. They didn't realize that the magpie was the old woman they'd wanted to kill. They didn't realize anything. What were they going to do with the Book without her help, if they ever really did get their grubby hands on it? They were as stupid as the pale worms she pecked out of the earth. Did they think they just had to shake the Book, or tap its rotting pages, for the gold she'd promised them to come raining down? No, most likely they thought nothing at all as they sat down there among the trees, waiting for darkness to fall. Only a few hours before they planned to ambush the Adderhead's black coach, what were they doing? Drinking home-distilled spirits stolen from some charcoal-burner, dreaming of the wealth to come, bragging that they'd kill first the Adder and then the Bluejay. What about the three words? That's what the magpie wanted to call down to them. Which of you fools can write them in the White Book? However, Snapper at least had obviously thought of that point.

'And once we have the Book,' he was babbling, 'we'll catch the Bluejay and force him to write the three words in it, and

then as soon as the Adder is dead and we're wallowing in gold we'll kill him too, because I'm sick and tired of hearing all those stupid songs about him.'

'Yes, let folk sing about us in future!' mumbled Gecko, putting a piece of bread soaked in brandy into the beak of the crow on his shoulder. The crow, alone among them, kept staring up at Mortola. 'We'll be more famous than anyone! More famous than the Bluejay, more famous than the Black Prince, more famous than Firefox and his fire-raisers. More famous than ... what was his old master's name?'

'Capricorn.'

The name pierced Mortola's heart like a red-hot needle, and she cowered on the branch where she was perching, shaken by yearning for her son. Ah, to see his face once more, bring him food once more, cut his pale hair ...

She uttered another shrill cry, and her pain and hatred echoed through the dark valley where the robbers were planning to attack the lord of the Castle of Night.

Her son. Her son. Her wonderful, cruel son. Mortola plucked feathers from her own breast as if that could drive the pain out of her heart.

Dead. Lost. And his murderer was playing the noble robber, his praises sung by the stupid rabble who used to tremble before her son! The murderer's shirt had been dyed red, the life had almost flowed out of him, but that little witch of a daughter had saved him. Was she whispering somewhere even now? I'll peck both their faces to pieces, I'll do such a good job of it that the treacherous maid won't recognize them ... Resa ... she saw you back at the cave, Mortola, she saw you, but what's she going to do about it? The bookbinder went alone, and she's playing the game that all women play in this world, the waiting game ... *ah, caterpillar!*

She pecked furiously at the hairy body. *Caterpillar, caterpillar*, cried the voice inside her. Damn this bird-brain. What had she

been thinking of just now? Killing. Yes. Revenge. The bird knew that feeling too. She felt her feathers ruffling up, her beak striking at the wood of the branch where she sat, as if it were the Bluejay's body.

A cold wind blew through the tree, shaking its evergreen branches. Rain fell on Mortola's plumage. Time to fly down under the dark yews that would hide her from the robbers, and try, yet again, to shake off the bird-shape, be human flesh once more.

But the bird thought: no! Time to tuck her beak into her feathers, time to let the rustling branches sing her to sleep. Nonsense! She ruffled herself up, shook her silly little head, called her own name back to mind. Mortola. Mortola. Capricorn's mother ...

What was that? The crow on Gecko's shoulder jerked its head and spread its wings. Snapper unsteadily got to his feet, drew his sword, and shouted to the others to do the same. But there stood the Adder's men already, among the trees. Their leader was a lean, hawk-faced man, his eyes as expressionless as the eyes of a corpse. Almost casually, he thrust his sword into the first robber's chest. Three soldiers attacked Snapper. He slit them open, although his hand must still be hurting from Mortola's teeth, but his men were dying like flies around him. Folk would sing songs about them, yes, but they'd be songs mocking the fools who had thought they could ambush the Adderhead as easily as any rich merchant.

Mortola gave another pitiful cry, while swords were plunged into the bodies below her. These helpers had been no use at all. Now she had no one left but Orpheus, with his ink-magic and his velvety voice.

The hawk-faced man wiped his sword on a dead robber's cloak and looked around. Mortola instinctively ducked, but her magpie form stared greedily down at the glittering weapons, at the rings and belt buckles. How pretty they'd look in her nest,

shining bright enough to bring down the stars from the sky by night!

None of the robbers was left standing. Even Snapper was on his knees by now. The hawk-faced man made a sign to his soldiers, and they dragged Snapper over to him. Die now, fool, thought Mortola bitterly. And the old woman you planned to strike down will watch you die!

The hawk-faced man asked Snapper something, hit him in the face, asked again. Mortola put her head on one side so as to hear them better and fluttered a few branches farther down, staying under cover of the needles.

'He was dying when we set out.' Snapper's voice still sounded defiant, but it was also hoarse with fear. The Black Prince. They were talking about him. I did it, Mortola wanted to cackle. I, Mortola, poisoned him! Ask the Adderhead if he remembers me!

She flew lower still. Was the lean killer talking about children? He knew about the cave, did he? How? If only her stupid head could think straight!

One of the soldiers drew his sword, but the hawk-faced leader told him brusquely to sheathe it again. He stepped back, signalling to his men to do so too. Snapper, still on his knees among his dead companions, raised his head in surprise. But the magpie, who had been about to fly down to pull rings off dead fingers and peck at silver buttons, froze on her branch and shook with fear, because something in her stupid bird-brain was crying out: *death, death, death!* And there it came, mildewed black among the trees, panting like a huge dog, shapeless yet somehow human – a Night-Mare. Snapper fell to pleading instead of cursing, and the hawk-faced man watched him with his dead eyes as his followers retreated far into the trees. But the Night-Mare made for Snapper as if night itself were opening a mouth full of a thousand teeth, bringing him the worst of all deaths.

Well, so what? Away with him, thought Mortola as her feathered body shook like an aspen tree. Away with the fool! He was no use to me. Orpheus must help me now. Orpheus ...

Orpheus. It was as if the name took shape the moment it came into her mind.

No, it couldn't be so. It couldn't be Orpheus suddenly standing there under the trees, with the Night-Mare cowering like a dog at his foolish smile.

Who told the Adderhead about the robbers, Mortola? Who told him?

Orpheus examined the trees with his glassy eyes. Then he raised his pale, plump hand and pointed to the magpie, who ducked when his finger swung her way.

Fly, Mortola, she thought. Fly!

The arrow hit her in mid-air, and pain drove the bird away. She no longer had wings as she fell, falling and falling through the cold air. Human bones broke when she hit the ground. And the last thing she saw was Orpheus's smile.



52

The Dead Men in the Forest

It was evening all afternoon.

It was snowing

And it was going to snow.

The blackbird sat

In the cedar-limbs.

Wallace Stevens,
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird

On, further and further on. Resa was feeling sick again, but she didn't say so. Whenever the Strong Man turned to look anxiously at her she smiled, so that he wouldn't slow down because of her. Snapper had more than half a day's start on them, and she was trying not to think about the magpie at all.

Go on, she told herself, go on. It's only a little sickness. Chew the leaves Roxane gave you and keep going. The forest through which they had been walking for days was darker than the Wayless Wood. She had never been in this part of the Inkworld before. It was like opening a new chapter, one she'd never yet read. 'The strolling players call it the forest where night sleeps,' the Strong Man had told her as they were passing through a ravine so dark, even by day, that she could hardly see her hand before her eyes. 'But the moss-women have given it the name of the Bearded Forest, because of all the healing lichens growing on the trees.' Resa liked that name better. With the frost lying on them, many trees did indeed look like ancient, bearded giants.

The Strong Man was good at reading tracks, but even Resa could have followed the trail left by Snapper and his men. Their footprints had frozen in many places, as if time had stopped. In other places they were obliterated by the rain, as if it had washed away the men themselves at the same time. The robbers hadn't taken any trouble to conceal their tracks. Why should they? They were the pursuers.

It rained a lot. At night the rain often turned to hail, but luckily there were enough evergreen trees under whose branches they could keep reasonably dry. At sunset it turned bitterly cold, and Resa was very glad of the fur-lined coat that the Strong Man had given her. Thanks to that coat and the coverings of moss that he cut from the trees for them both, she could sleep at night in spite of the cold.

Go on, Resa, she thought, keep going. The magpie flies fast, and Snapper is quick with his knife. A bird uttered a hoarse cry in the trees above her, and she looked up in alarm, but it was only a crow and not a magpie gazing down at her.

'Caw!' The Strong Man replied to the black bird with a croak of his own (even the owls talked to him), and then suddenly stopped. 'What the devil's that?' he murmured, scratching his shorn head.

Resa too stopped, alarmed. 'What's the matter? Have you lost the way?'

'Me? Not in a thousand years, not in any forest in the world! Certainly not this one.' The Strong Man bent down and investigated the tracks on the fallen leaves, now frozen stiff. 'My cousin taught me to poach here. He showed me how to talk to the birds and make blankets from the bearded lichen on the trees. And he showed me the Castle in the Lake. No, Snapper's lost his way, not me. He's bearing much too far west!'

'Your cousin?' Resa looked at him curiously. 'Is he among the robbers too?'

The Strong Man shook his head. 'He joined the fire-raisers,' he said, without looking at Resa. 'Disappeared when Capricorn did and never came back. He was a tall, ugly fellow, but I was always stronger, even when we were both little boys. I often wonder what's become of him. He may have been one of those damn fire-raisers, but he was still my cousin, see what I mean?'

Tall and ugly ... Resa thought back to Capricorn's men. Flatnose? Oh, Strong Man, Mo's voice brought him to his death, she thought. Would you still go on protecting Mo if you knew? Yes, he probably would.

'Let's follow Snapper's tracks,' she said. 'I want to know why he strayed from his path!'

They found him and his men very soon, in a clearing brown with withered leaves. The dead men lay there as if the trees had shed them along with their foliage. Ravens were already pecking at their flesh. Resa shooed the birds away – and stepped back in horror when she saw Snapper's body.

'What did that?'

'A Night-Mare!' The Strong Man's reply was barely audible.

'A Night-Mare? But they kill through fear, nothing else. I've seen it!'

‘Yes, but only if they’re prevented from eating their victims. They eat them too if they’re allowed.’

Mo had once given her a dragonfly’s cast-off case. Every limb could still be traced under the empty skin it had shed. There wasn’t much more than that left of Snapper. Resa threw up there and then beside the dead men.

‘I don’t like this.’ The Strong Man examined the blood-soaked leaves. ‘Looks almost as if the men who killed them watched the Night-Mare eat him ... as if they’d brought it with them, like the Prince brings his bear!’ He looked around, but nothing stirred. Only the ravens perched in the trees, waiting.

The Strong Man drew Gecko’s cloak over his dead face. ‘I’m going to follow the trails and find out where the killers came from.’

‘You don’t need to.’ Resa bent over one of the dead robbers and raised his left hand. The thumb was missing. ‘Your little brother told me the Adderhead has a new bodyguard, a man known as Thumbling. They say he used to be one of the torturers in the Castle of Night until his master promoted him. Doria says he’s notorious for cutting a thumb off every man he kills. He makes little pipes out of the thumb-bones to mock the Piper with them ... and it seems he has a very large collection.’ Resa began trembling, even though she no longer had to fear Snapper. ‘She’ll never be able to protect him,’ she whispered. ‘Violante can’t protect Mo. They’ll kill him!’

The Strong Man helped her to her feet and awkwardly put his arms around her.

‘What do we do now?’ he asked. ‘Go back?’

But Resa shook her head. The killers had a Night-Mare with them. A Night-Mare. She looked round.

‘The magpie,’ she said. ‘Where’s the magpie? Call her!’

‘I told you, she doesn’t sound like a real bird,’ said the Strong Man, but all the same he imitated a magpie’s cry. There was no

reply, but just as the Strong Man was about to try again Resa saw the dead woman.

Mortola was lying a little way from the others, with an arrow in her breast. Resa had often imagined what it would feel like to see the woman she had served for so long lying dead at last. She had so often wanted to kill Mortola herself, but now she felt nothing at all. A few black feathers lay beside the corpse in the snow, and the fingernails of Mortola's left hand were still like a bird's claws. Resa bent down and took the bag from Mortola's belt. There were some tiny black seeds in it, the same as the seeds still sticking to Mortola's pale lips.

'Who's that?' The Strong Man stared at the old woman in disbelief.

'The woman who used to mix poisons for Capricorn. You must have heard of her. She was his mother.'

The Strong Man nodded, and involuntarily took a step back.

Resa tied Mortola's bag to her own belt. 'When I was one of her maids ...' (she couldn't help smiling at the surprise in the Strong Man's eyes) '... when I was still one of her maids, it was said that Mortola had discovered a plant with seeds that could change your shape. *Little Death*, the other maids called it, and they whispered that it sent you crazy if you used it too often. They showed me the plant – it can be used as a deadly poison too, but I always thought its other quality was just a fairy tale. Obviously I was wrong.' Resa picked up one of the magpie feathers and laid it on Mortola's pierced breast. 'And they also said that Mortola had given up using *Little Death* after a fox nearly killed her in her bird-shape. But as soon as I saw the magpie in the cave I felt sure it was her.'

She rose to her feet.

The Strong Man pointed to the bag at her belt. 'Sounds to me like you'd better leave those seeds here.'

'Should I?' replied Resa. 'Yes, maybe you're right. Come on, let's go. It will soon be dark.'



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53

Human Nests

Take note:
words hide in the night
in caves of music and image.
Still humid and pregnant with sleep
they turn in a winding river and by neglect are
transformed.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade,
Looking for Poetry

Meggie's feet were so cold that she could hardly feel her toes, in spite of her boots. They were still the pair she had brought from the other world. Only on their endless march over the last few days had they all realized what good shelter the cave had offered from the coming winter – and how flimsy their clothes were. The rain was even worse than the

cold. It dripped off the trees and turned the ground to mud that froze when evening came. One little girl had already sprained her ankle, and Elinor was carrying her. Everyone who could was carrying one of the smaller children, though there weren't enough of them to go round. Snapper had taken his men with him, and Resa and the Strong Man had gone too.

The Black Prince carried three children at once, two in his arms and one on his back, although he was still hardly eating anything, and Roxane kept making him stop to rest. Meggie pressed her face into the hair of the little boy who was clinging round her neck. Beppe. He reminded her of Fenoglio's grandson. Beppe didn't weigh much – the children hadn't had enough to eat for days – but after all the hours that Meggie had spent trudging through the mud with the little boy in her arms he seemed as heavy as an adult. 'Meggie, sing me one of those songs!' he kept saying, and she sang in a soft voice that was reedy with weariness. Songs about the Bluejay, of course. By now she sometimes forgot that she was also singing about her father. When she closed her eyes now and then in sheer exhaustion she saw the castle Farid had shown her in the fire, a growth of dark stone reflected on a misty lake. She'd tried desperately to catch a sight of Mo somewhere among the walls, but she couldn't see him.

She was alone. She was even more alone now that Resa had gone. In spite of Elinor, in spite of Fenoglio, in spite of all the children, and definitely in spite of Farid. But out of this feeling of being abandoned, which only Doria could sometimes dispel, something else had grown: a sense that she must protect those who, like herself, were on their own, without father or mother, seeking shelter in a world that was as strange to them as to Meggie, although these children had never known any other.

Fenoglio himself, who was leading them, had only written about this world without knowing it, yet now they had nothing but his words to guide them.

He was walking at the front with the Black Prince. Despina clung to his back, though she was older than some of the children who had to walk. Her brother was up ahead with the older boys. They were running about among the trees as though they didn't feel tired at all. The Black Prince kept calling them back, telling them to do as the older girls did and carry the little ones. Farid and Doria were so far in advance of the rest of the party that Meggie hadn't seen them for nearly an hour. They were looking for the tree that Fenoglio had described to the Black Prince, so persuasively that the Prince had decided they should set off at once. And indeed, what other hope did they have?

'How much further?' Meggie heard Despina ask, not for the first time.

'Not very far now, not very far,' replied Fenoglio, but did he really know?

Meggie had heard him telling the Black Prince about the human nests. *They look like huge fairies' nests, but people lived in them, Prince! Many people. They built the nests when giants started coming for their children, and they chose such a tall tree that even the largest giants couldn't reach up to it.*

'Which goes to show,' he had whispered to Meggie, 'that it's sensible not to make your giants too big when you're writing a story about them!'

'Human nests?' she had whispered back. 'Have you only just thought that up?'

'Don't be ridiculous! What makes you think that?' Fenoglio sounded offended. 'Have I asked you to read them into existence? No. This world is so well equipped that you can manage very well without stopping to make up something new every five minutes – although that fool Orpheus thinks otherwise. I hope by now he's begging in the streets of Ombra – that'd serve him right for making my fairies rainbow-coloured!'

‘Beppe, walk for a little, will you?’ Meggie put the boy down, although he resisted, and instead picked up a little girl who was so tired that she could hardly keep on her feet.

‘How much further?’ A question that she had asked Mo so often herself, on those endless drives when they were going to cure another few sick books. ‘Not far now, Meggie!’ She could almost hear her father’s voice, and for a moment her weariness made her imagine he was putting his jacket around her cold shoulders, but it was only a branch brushing against her back, and when she slipped on the wet leaves that covered the ground like a carpet, only Roxane’s hand kept her from falling.

‘Careful, Meggie,’ she said, and for a moment her face seemed as familiar as Resa’s.

‘We’ve found the tree!’ Doria appeared in front of them so suddenly that some of the smaller children hid, alarmed, behind the grown-ups. He was drenched with rain and trembling with cold, but he looked happy – happier than he had been for many days.

‘Farid stayed there. He’s going to climb the tree and see if the nests are still fit to live in!’ Doria spread his arms wide. ‘They’re huge! We’ll have to construct something to help us haul the little ones up, but I have an idea.’

Meggie had never heard him talk so fast or so much before. One of the little girls ran towards him, and Doria picked her up and whirled her round in a circle with him, laughing. ‘The Milksop will never find us up there!’ he cried. ‘Now we only have to learn to fly and we can live as free as the birds!’

The children all began talking excitedly, until the Black Prince raised his hand. ‘Where is the tree?’ he asked Doria. His voice was heavy with fatigue. Sometimes Meggie feared that the poison had broken something in him, casting a shadow over the light that had always been a part of him before.

‘Right ahead, there!’ Doria pointed through the trees that dripped with rain.

Suddenly even the weariest feet could walk again. 'Quiet!' the Prince warned the children as they shouted louder and louder, but they were too excited to obey, and the forest echoed to the sound of their clear voices.

'There, told you so, didn't I?' Suddenly Fenoglio was walking beside Meggie, his eyes full of his old pride in the world he had written. It was easily aroused.

'Yes, you did.' Elinor got in before Meggie with the answer. She was obviously feeling cross in her damp clothes. 'But I haven't seen these fabulous nests of yours yet, and I must say the prospect of perching up at the top of a tree in this weather doesn't exactly sound enticing.'

Fenoglio glared at Elinor with contempt. 'Meggie,' he asked in a low voice, 'what's that lad there called? You know, the Strong Man's brother.'

'You mean Doria?'

Doria glanced around as she spoke his name, and Meggie smiled at him. She liked the way he looked at her. His glance warmed her heart in a way quite unlike Farid's. In a very different way.

'Doria,' murmured Fenoglio. 'Doria. Sounds somehow familiar to me.'

'Hardly surprising,' said Elinor sarcastically. 'The Dorias were a very famous aristocratic Italian family.'

Fenoglio gave her a look that was far from friendly, but he never got a chance to reply.

'There they are!'

Ivo's voice was so loud in the gathering dusk that Minerva instinctively put her hand over his mouth.

And there they really were.

Human nests.

They looked just as Fenoglio had described them in his book. He had read the passage aloud to Meggie. *Gigantic nests in the crown of a mighty tree, with evergreen branches reaching so high into the sky that its top seemed lost in the clouds.* The nests were round, like fairies' nests, but Meggie thought she saw bridges between them, ladders and nets made of twining tendrils. The children gathered around the Black Prince and stared up, enchanted, as if he had led them to a castle in the clouds. But Fenoglio looked happiest of all.

'Aren't they fabulous?' he cried.

'They're a very long way up, that's for sure!' Elinor sounded far from enthusiastic.

'Well, that's the whole point!' replied Fenoglio brusquely, but Minerva and the other women were also looking at the nests in dismay.

'What happened to the people who used to live up there?' asked Despina. 'Did they fall out of the nests?'

'Of course not!' said Fenoglio impatiently, but Meggie could see he hadn't the faintest idea what had happened to the original nest-dwellers.

'Oh no, I suppose they just wanted to get back to the ground!' said Jasper in his clear little voice.

The two glass men were sitting in the deep pockets of Darius's coat. He was the only one who had anything like proper winter clothing, but he was always ready to share his coat generously with a few of the children. He let them slip in under the warm fabric like chicks under a mother hen's wings.

The Black Prince looked up at the strange dwellings, scrutinized the tree that they would have to climb – and said nothing.

'We can pull the children up in nets,' said Doria. 'The creepers will make ropes. Farid and I have tried them. They'll hold.'

‘This is the best possible hiding place!’

It was Farid’s voice calling to them. Nimble as a squirrel, he came climbing down the trunk as if he had lived in trees in his old life, not the desert. ‘Even if the Milksop’s hounds find us we can defend ourselves from up here!’

‘With luck they won’t find us at all,’ said the Black Prince. ‘I hope we’ll be able to hold out up there until ...’

They all looked at him expectantly. Until – yes, until when?

‘Until the Bluejay’s killed the Adderhead!’ said one of the children so confidently that the Prince had to smile.

‘Yes, exactly. Until the Bluejay’s killed the Adderhead.’

‘And the Piper!’ added one of the boys.

‘Of course, the Piper too.’ Hope and anxiety were equally balanced in the glance that Battista exchanged with the Black Prince.

‘That’s right, he’ll kill them both, and then he’ll marry Her Ugliness and they’ll reign over Ombra and live happily ever after!’ Despina’s smile was as delighted as if she could already see the wedding before her eyes.

‘No, no!’ Fenoglio looked at her, as horrified as if her words might come true the next moment. ‘The Bluejay already has a wife, Despina, doesn’t he? Have you forgotten Meggie’s mother?’

Despina glanced at Meggie in alarm and put her hand over her mouth, but Meggie just stroked her smooth hair. ‘Sounds like a good story all the same,’ she whispered to the child.

‘Start getting ropes up into the tree,’ the Black Prince told Battista, ‘and ask Doria just how he plans to haul the nets up. The rest of you, climb to the top of the tree and see which nests are still sound.’

Meggie looked up at the dense thicket of branches. She had never set eyes on a tree like it before. The bark was reddish brown, but as rough as the bark of an oak, and the trunk did

not branch until high up in the tree, although it had so many bulges that you could find footholds and handholds everywhere. In some places huge tree fungi formed platforms. Hollows gaped in the towering trunk, and crevices full of feathers showed that human beings were not the only creatures to have nested in this tree. Perhaps I should ask Doria if he can really build me wings, Meggie said to herself, and suddenly she thought of the magpie that had frightened her mother so much.

Why hadn't Resa taken her along? Because she thinks I'm still a small child, she told herself.

'Meggie?' One of the children slipped her cold fingers into Meggie's hand. Elinor had nicknamed the little girl Fire-Elf because of her hair, which was as red as if Dustfinger had sprinkled it with sparks. How old was she? Four? Five? Many of the children didn't know their own ages.

'Beppe says there are birds that eat children up there.'

'Nonsense. Anyway, how would he know? You think Beppe's been up there already?'

Fire-Elf smiled in relief and looked sternly at Beppe. But her face grew grave again as, her fingers still clutching Meggie's hand firmly, she listened with the others to Farid reporting to the Black Prince.

'The nests are so large that I should think five or even six of us can sleep in each of them!' He sounded so excited. 'Many of the bridges are crumbling, but there are enough creepers and timber up there to repair them.'

'We have hardly any tools,' Doria pointed out. 'We must make do with our knives and swords.'

The robbers looked in some alarm at their swordbelts.

'The crown of the tree is dense enough to give us good shelter from the wind, but there are gaps in it in some places,' Farid went on. 'I guess they were lookout points for the guards. We'll have to pad and line the nests, as the fairies do.'

‘Maybe some of us had better stay down here,’ Elfbane put in. ‘We have to go hunting and—’

‘Oh, you can hunt up there!’ Farid interrupted. ‘There are flocks of birds, and I’ve seen large squirrels, and creatures like rabbits with fingers that cling to the branches. Though there are wild cats up there as well ...’

The women looked at each other, frightened.

‘... and bats, and long-tailed brownies,’ Farid went on. ‘There’s a whole world up there! It has caves in it, and a lot of the branches are so wide you can easily walk along them. Flowers and mushrooms grow there! It’s fabulous. Wonderful!’

Fenoglio was smiling all over his wrinkled face, like a king hearing praise of his domain, and even Elinor looked wistfully up the rough trunk for the first time. Some of the children wanted to climb the tree at once, but the women stopped them. ‘Go and collect leaves,’ they told them, ‘and moss and birds’ feathers – anything you can find to make soft linings.’

The sun was already low as the robbers began stretching ropes, weaving nets, and building wooden platforms to be hauled up the tall trunk. Battista went back with some of the men to wipe out their tracks, and Meggie saw the Black Prince looking at his bear, at a loss. How was he going to get the bear up the tree? What would happen to the packhorses? So many questions, and he still wasn’t at all sure that they had outrun the Milksop.

Meggie was just helping Minerva to tie creepers together to make a net for provisions when Fenoglio drew her aside, a conspiratorial expression on his face.

‘You won’t believe this!’ he murmured to her when they were standing among the mighty roots of the tree. ‘And don’t you dare tell Loredan about it. She’d only accuse me of having delusions of grandeur again!’

‘What don’t you want me to tell her?’ Meggie looked at him blankly.

‘Well, that boy, you know who I mean – the one who keeps looking at you and brings you flowers and turns Farid green with jealousy. Doria ...’

Above them the crown of the tree was bathed with red in the light of the setting sun, and the nests hung among its branches like black fruits.

Feeling embarrassed, Meggie turned her face away. ‘What about him?’

Fenoglio looked round as if afraid that Elinor might appear behind him next moment. ‘Meggie,’ he said, lowering his voice, ‘I think I made him up too, just like Dustfinger and the Black Prince!’

‘Oh, nonsense, what are you talking about?’ Meggie whispered back. ‘Doria probably wasn’t even born when you were writing your book!’

‘Yes, yes, I know! That’s the confusing part of it! All these children,’ said Fenoglio, with a sweeping gesture towards the children searching busily for moss and feathers under the trees, ‘my story lays them like eggs, entirely without my aid. It’s a very fertile story! But that boy ...’ Fenoglio lowered his voice as if Doria could hear him, although he was far away with Battista, kneeling on the forest floor and turning knives into machetes and saws. ‘Meggie, this is where it gets so crazy: I wrote a story about him, but the character with his name was grown-up! And even stranger – the story was never published! Presumably it’s still lying in a drawer in my old desk, or my grandchildren have made it into balls of paper to throw for the cats!’

‘But that’s impossible. He can’t be the same person.’ Meggie unobtrusively glanced at Doria. She liked the sight of him; she liked it very much. ‘What’s this story about?’ she asked. ‘What does this grown-up Doria do?’

‘He builds castles and city walls. He even invents a flying machine, a clock to measure time, and –’ here Fenoglio looked

at Meggie – ‘and a printing machine for a famous bookbinder.’

‘Really?’ Meggie suddenly felt warm, the way she used to when Mo had told her a particularly good story. For a famous bookbinder. Just for a moment she forgot all about Doria and thought only of her father. Perhaps Fenoglio had already written the words that would keep Mo alive, perhaps he’d written them long ago. Oh, please, she begged Fenoglio’s story, let the bookbinder be Mo!

‘Doria the Enchanter, I called him,’ Fenoglio whispered. ‘But it’s with his hands that he works enchantment, like your father. And now, listen to this: it gets even better! This Doria has a wife who is said to come from a distant land, and she often gives him his ideas in the first place. Isn’t that strange?’

‘What’s so strange about it?’ Meggie felt herself blushing, and just at that moment Farid looked at her. ‘Did you give her a name?’ she asked Fenoglio.

Awkwardly, the old man cleared his throat. ‘Well, you know I sometimes neglect my women characters a bit, and I couldn’t find the right name, so I just called her his wife.’

Meggie had to smile. Yes, that was very like Fenoglio. ‘Doria has two stiff fingers on his left hand,’ she pointed out. ‘So how could he do all the things you say?’

‘But I wrote him those stiff fingers!’ cried Fenoglio out loud, forgetting to be quiet. Doria raised his head and glanced at them, but luckily the Black Prince went up to him just at that moment.

‘His father broke them,’ Fenoglio went on more quietly. ‘When he was drunk. He was going to hit Doria’s sister, and Doria tried to protect her.’

Meggie leant back against the tree trunk. She felt as if she could hear its heart beating behind her, a gigantic heart in the wood. It was all a dream, just a dream. ‘What was this sister’s name?’ she asked. ‘Susa?’

‘How should I know?’ retorted Fenoglio. ‘I can’t remember everything. Maybe she didn’t have a name any more than his wife did. Anyway, it will just make him all the more famous later when people find out he can build such marvels in spite of his stiff fingers!’

‘I see,’ murmured Meggie – and caught herself wondering what Doria would look like when he grew up. ‘That’s a lovely story,’ she said.

‘I know,’ agreed Fenoglio, leaning back with a self-satisfied sigh against the tree he had described in his book so many years ago. ‘But not a word to the boy about all this, of course.’

‘Of course not. Did you leave any more stories like that in your desk drawers? Do you know what will happen to Minerva’s children, and to Beppe and Fire-Elf?’

Fenoglio never got around to answering that question.

‘Well, isn’t that wonderful!’ Elinor was standing in front of them with her arms full of moss. ‘Tell me, Meggie, isn’t the fellow beside you the laziest man in this world – and any other? Everyone else is working while he stands here staring into space!’

‘Oh yes, and what about Meggie?’ Fenoglio retorted indignantly. ‘Anyway, you’d none of you have *anything* to do if the laziest man in all the worlds hadn’t thought up this tree, and the nests in its branches!’

Elinor was not in the least impressed. ‘We’re probably all going to break our necks in those wretched nests,’ was all she said. ‘And I’m not sure if this is any better than the mines.’

‘Calm down, Loredan. In any case, the Piper wouldn’t want *you* for the mines,’ replied Fenoglio. ‘You’d get stuck in the first tunnel.’

Meggie left them to their quarrel. Lights were beginning to dance among the trees. At first Meggie thought they were glow-worms, but when some of them settled on her arms she saw

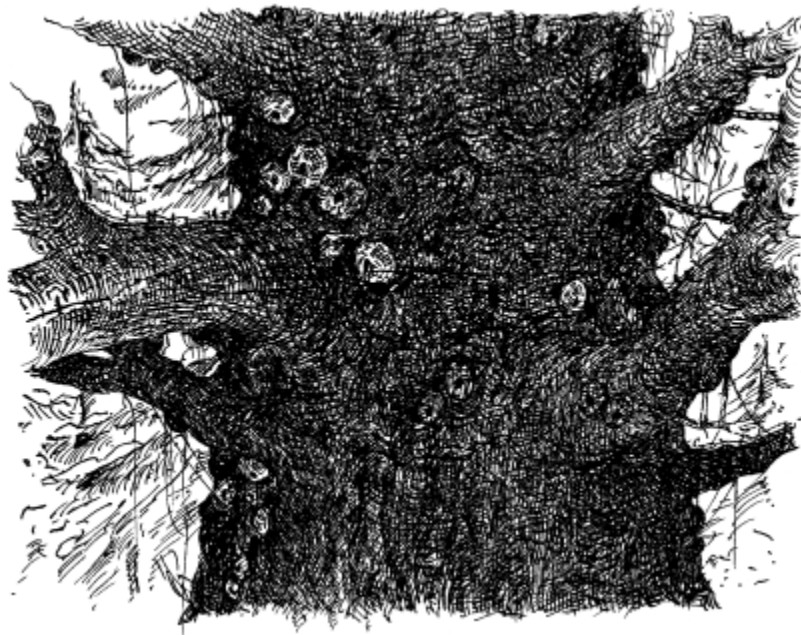
that they were tiny moths, shining as if moonlight clung to them.

A new chapter, she thought, looking up at the nests. A new place. And Fenoglio can tell me about Doria's future, but he doesn't know what his story is going to say about my father. Why didn't Resa take me with her?

Because your mother is a clever woman, Fenoglio would have told her. Who but you is going to read my words if I find the right ones? Darius? No, Meggie, you're the best teller of this tale. If you really want to help your father, your place is here beside me. And Mortimer would certainly see it just the same way!

Yes, she supposed he would.

One of the moths settled on her hand, shining on her finger like a ring. *This Doria has a wife who is said to come from a distant land, and she often gives him his ideas in the first place.* Yes. That really was strange.



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The White Whispering

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

William Butler Yeats,
Aedh Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

From the tower battlements, Dustfinger looked down on a lake as black as night, where the reflection of the castle swam in a sea of stars. The wind passing over his unscarred

face was cold from the snow of the surrounding mountains, and Dustfinger relished life as if he were tasting it for the first time. The longing it brought, and the desire. All the bitterness, all the sweetness, even if it was only for a while, never for more than a while, everything gained and lost, lost and found again.

Even the blackness of the trees intoxicated him with joy. The night blackened them as if to prove once and for all that this world was nothing but ink. And didn't the snow on the mountain peaks look like paper?

Even so ...

Above his head the moon burnt a silver hole in the night, and the stars surrounded it like fire-elves. Dustfinger tried to remember whether he had seen the moon in the realm of the dead too. Perhaps. Why did death make life taste so much sweeter? Why could the heart love only what it could also lose? Why? Why ...

The White Women knew some of the answers, but they hadn't told him all of them. Later, they had whispered when they let him go. Another time. You will often come to us. And often go again.

Gwin sat on the battlements with him, listening uneasily to the lapping of the water. The marten didn't like the castle. Behind him, Silvertongue stirred in his sleep. Without a word, the two of them had decided to sleep up here on the tower behind the battlements, even though it was cold. Dustfinger didn't like sleeping in closed rooms, and Silvertongue seemed to feel the same. Although perhaps he slept up here only because Violante roamed the painted rooms even at night – as restlessly as if she were looking for her dead mother, or as if her sleeplessness would hasten the Adder's arrival. Did any daughter ever wait so impatiently to kill her father?

Violante was not the only one who couldn't sleep. Her illuminator was sitting in the room full of dead books, trying to teach his left hand the art that his right had once mastered so

superbly. He sat there hour after hour, at a desk that Brianna had dusted for him, forcing his unpractised fingers to trace leaves and tendrils, birds and tiny faces, while the useless stump of his right wrist held down the parchment he had, with forethought, brought with him.

‘Shall I find you a glass man in the forest?’ Dustfinger had asked him, but Balbulus had only shaken his head.

‘I don’t work with glass men,’ he replied morosely. ‘They’re too liable to leave their footprints all over my pictures!’

Silvertongue slept uneasily. Sleep brought him no peace, and it seemed worse tonight than the nights before. Presumably they were with him again. When the White Women slipped into your dreams you didn’t see them. They came to Silvertongue more often than to Dustfinger himself, as if to make sure that the Bluejay didn’t forget the bargain he had struck with their mistress, the Great Shape-Changer who made all things wither and blossom, grow and decay.

They were with him now, their cool fingers stroking his heart. Dustfinger could feel it as if it were his own. Let him sleep, he thought. Let him rest from the fear that day brings him: fear for himself, fear for his daughter, fear that he’s done the wrong thing. Leave him alone.

He went over to him and placed his hand on his breast. Silvertongue woke with a start, pale-faced. Yes, they had been with him, and Dustfinger made fire dance on his fingers. He knew the chill that those visitors left behind. It was fresh and clear, pure as snow, but it both froze and burnt the heart.

‘What were they whispering this time? *Bluejay, immortality is very close?*’

Silvertongue pushed aside the fur under which he was sleeping. His hands shook as if he had been holding them too long in cold water.

Dustfinger let the fire grow, and then gently pressed his hand to the other man’s heart again. ‘Better?’

Silvertongue nodded. He did not push the hand away, even though it was still hotter than human skin. 'Did they pour fire into your veins to bring you back to life?' Farid had asked Dustfinger. 'Perhaps,' he had replied. The idea pleased him.

'Heavens, they must really love you,' he said when Silvertongue got to his feet, still drowsy. 'Unfortunately they sometimes forget that their love always leads to death.'

'Yes. Yes, they forget that. Thank you for waking me.' Silvertongue went over to the battlements and looked out into the night. '*He's coming, Bluejay.* That's what they were whispering this time. *He's coming.* But,' he turned and looked at Dustfinger, 'they said the Piper was preparing the way for him. What do you think they mean by that?'

'Whatever it means,' said Dustfinger, stepping to his side, 'the Piper will have to cross the bridge, like his master, so we'll see him coming in good time.' It still struck Dustfinger as strange that he could speak the Piper's name without feeling fear. But it seemed as if he had left his fears behind with the dead for ever.

The wind ruffled the surface of the lake. Violante's soldiers marched up and down on the bridge, and Dustfinger thought he could hear their mistress's restless footsteps up here on the battlements. Violante's footsteps – and the scratching of Balbulus's pen.

Silvertongue looked at him. 'Show me Resa. The way you conjured up Violante's mother and her sisters out of the fire.'

Dustfinger hesitated.

'Come on,' said Silvertongue. 'I know you're almost as familiar with her face as I am.'

I've told Mo everything. That was what Resa had whispered to him in the dungeons of the Castle of Night. Obviously she had not been lying. Of course not, Dustfinger told himself. She can't tell a lie any more than the man she loves can.

He traced a figure in the night and made the flames paint it.

Silvertongue instinctively put out his hand, but snatched his fingers away when the fire stung them.

‘What about Meggie?’ Love was written all over his face. No, he hadn’t changed, whatever anyone said. He was like an open book, with his burning heart and a voice that could conjure up whatever he wanted – just as Dustfinger could conjure up images with fire.

The flames painted Meggie in the night, filling her with warm life. It looked so real that her father turned away abruptly, because his hands wanted to reach into the fire again.

‘Your turn now.’ Dustfinger left the fiery figures standing behind the battlements.

‘Mine?’

‘Yes, tell me about Roxane. Live up to your name, Silvertongue.’

The Bluejay smiled and leant back against the stones. ‘Roxane? That’s easy,’ he said softly. ‘Fenoglio has written wonderful things about her.’

When he began to speak, his voice took hold of Dustfinger like a hand touching his heart. He felt the words on his skin as if they were Roxane’s hands. *Dustfinger had never seen a more beautiful woman before. Her hair was as black as the night that he loved. Her eyes were the darkness under the trees, ravens’ feathers and the sooty breath of the fire. Her skin reminded him of moonlight on the wings of the fairies ...*

Dustfinger closed his eyes and could hear Roxane breathing beside him. He wanted Silvertongue to go on and on until the words became flesh and blood, but Fenoglio’s words soon came to an end, and Roxane was gone.

‘And Brianna?’ Silvertongue spoke her name, and Dustfinger could already see his daughter standing there in the night, turning her face away as she usually did when he came close to

her. 'Your daughter is here, but you hardly dare look at her. Shall I show you Brianna too?'

'Yes,' said Dustfinger softly, 'show me Brianna.'

Silvertongue cleared his throat, as if to make sure that his voice was at its full strength. 'There's nothing written about your daughter in Fenoglio's book, except for her name and a few words about the small child that she isn't any more. So I can only say what everyone can see about her.'

Dustfinger's heart contracted, as if afraid of the words that were coming. His daughter, his daughter who was a stranger to him.

'Brianna has inherited her mother's beauty, but everyone who sets eyes on her thinks of you too.' Silvertongue spoke the words carefully, as if plucking every one of them out of the night, assembling Brianna's face out of the stars. 'There's fire in her hair and in her heart, and when she looks in the mirror she thinks of her father ...'

And bears him a grudge for coming back from the dead without bringing Cosimo too, thought Dustfinger. Hush, he wanted to tell Silvertongue, forget my daughter. Tell me more about Roxane instead. But he kept silent, and Silvertongue went on.

'Brianna is so much more grown-up than Meggie, but sometimes she looks like a lost child whose own beauty seems uncanny to her. She has her mother's grace and her beautiful voice – even the Prince's bear listens when Brianna sings – but all her songs are sad, saying that those we love will be lost someday.'

Dustfinger felt tears on his face. He had forgotten how they felt, so cool on his skin. He wiped them away with his hot fingers.

But Silvertongue went on, his voice as gentle as if he were speaking of his own daughter. 'She looks at you when she thinks you won't notice. She follows you with her eyes as if

looking for herself in your face. And no doubt she wishes both of us would tell her what it's like among the dead, and whether we saw Cosimo there.'

'I saw two of him,' said Dustfinger softly. 'I expect she'd gladly exchange me for either of them.'

He turned and looked down at the lake.

'What is it?' asked Silvertongue.

Without a word, Dustfinger pointed down. A fiery serpent was crawling through the night. Torches. The waiting was over. The guards on the bridge began to move. One of them ran back to the castle to take the news to Violante.

The Adderhead was coming.



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The Wrong Time

‘Is he your latest?’ asked Man.

‘Hard to say,’ God replied, peering into the Newt’s eyes. ‘He might have been here a while. Some things take an awful lot of work. But others – they just seem to turn up, somehow. All ready-made. Very odd!’

Ted Hughes,
*The Playmate, from The Dreamcatcher and Other
Stories*

*D*ustfinger saw the torches down in the forest. Of course. The Adderhead feared daylight. Damn it all, the ink was too thick again.

‘Rosenquartz!’ Fenoglio wiped the pen on his sleeve and looked around in search of the glass man. Walls made of branches elaborately woven together, the writing-board Doria

had made him, his bed of leaves and moss, the candle that Farid kept relighting for him when the wind blew it out – but no Rosenquartz.

Very likely he and Jasper hadn't yet given up hope of finding glass women, even up here. After all, Farid had been fool enough to tell them he'd seen at least two – 'as pretty as fairies,' the idiot had added! Ever since then the two glass men had been clambering around in the branches so eagerly that it was only a question of time when they would break their silly necks. Stupid creatures.

Well, never mind. Fenoglio dipped his pen back into the thick ink. He must just make do with things as they were. He loved his new perch for writing, so high that his world was truly at his feet, even if the glass man kept playing truant and it was terribly cold at night. Nowhere before had he felt so strongly that the words were coming to him as if of their own accord.

Yes, he'd write the Bluejay his very best song up here in the crown of a tree. What place could be more suitable? The last picture the flames showed Farid had been reassuring: Dustfinger behind the castle battlements, Mortimer asleep ... it could only mean that the Adderhead hadn't reached the castle yet. Well, how could he, Fenoglio? he thought with satisfaction. You broke his coach wheel in the middle of the darkest part of the forest. That should hold the Silver Prince up for at least two days, if not more. Plenty of time for writing, now that the words loved him again.

'Rosenquartz!' If I have to call him once more, thought Fenoglio, I personally am going to throw him out of this tree.

'I'm not hard of hearing, thank you very much. Far from it. I hear better than you.' The glass man emerged from the darkness so suddenly that Fenoglio left a large blot of ink on the paper right beside the Adderhead's name. Well, he hoped that was a good omen. Rosenquartz dipped a thin twig in the ink and started stirring without a word of apology, without a

word to explain where he had been. Concentrate, Fenoglio. Forget the glass man. Write.

And the words came. They came easily. The Adderhead was on his way back to the castle where he had once paid court to Violante's mother, and his immortality was a burden to him. In his swollen hands he held the White Book that tormented him worse than his own torturers could have done. But soon there would be an end to it, because his daughter was going to hand over the man who had done all this to him. How sweet revenge would taste when the Bluejay had cured the book and his own rotting flesh! Dream of your revenge, Silver Prince, thought Fenoglio as he wrote down the Adderhead's dark thoughts. Think of nothing but your revenge – and forget that you've never trusted your daughter!

'Well, fancy that, he's writing!' The words were only a whisper, but the Adderhead's face, so clear a moment ago that Fenoglio could have touched it, blurred and changed into the face of Signora Loredan. Meggie was with her. Why wasn't the child asleep? It didn't surprise Fenoglio in the least that her deranged aunt clambered around the branches by night, very likely in pursuit of every shining moth, but Meggie – she was tired to death after insisting on climbing the trunk with Doria, instead of being pulled up like the children.

'Yes, he's writing,' he growled. 'And he'd probably have finished long ago if people didn't keep interrupting him the whole time.'

'What do you mean, the whole time?' replied Loredan. She sounded aggressive again, and she looked so silly in the three dresses she was wearing, one on top of the other. It was amazing she could find so many in her considerable size. Luckily Battista had been able to make jackets for the children out of the monstrous garment she'd been wearing when she had stumbled into Fenoglio's world.

‘Elinor—’ Meggie tried to interrupt her, but no one could ever stop that busy tongue, as Fenoglio had discovered by now.

‘The whole time, he says!’ Now she was letting wax from her candle drop on to the paper too! ‘Is he hard at work day and night making sure the children don’t fall out of these damn nests, is he climbing up and down this wretched tree to bring up something to eat? Is he repairing the walls so that the wind doesn’t kill us all, is he keeping watch? No, but people are interrupting him *the whole time*.’

Splash. Another drop of candle wax. And what a nerve she had, leaning over to look at the words he’d just written. ‘This really doesn’t sound bad,’ she informed Meggie, as if Fenoglio had dissolved into the cold forest air before their eyes. ‘No, not at all bad.’

It was beyond belief.

Now Rosenquartz too was bending over his lines, wrinkling up his glassy forehead so much that it looked as if water were tracing folds there.

‘Oh, and do you, by any chance, want to deliver your opinion as well before I go on writing?’ Fenoglio asked him sharply. ‘Anything in particular you fancy? You want me to put a heroic glass man into the story, or a fat woman who always knows best and will drive the Adderhead to such distraction that he’ll hand himself over to the White Women of his own free will? That would be one solution, I suppose.’

Meggie came up to him and put her hand on his shoulder. ‘You don’t know how much longer you’ll need, do you?’ Her voice sounded so desolate. Not at all like a voice that had already changed this world several times.

‘It won’t be long now.’ Fenoglio took great care to sound confident. ‘The words are coming. They—’ He fell silent.

From outside came the hoarse, long-drawn-out cry of a falcon. Again and again. The guards’ alarm signal. Oh no.

The nest into which Fenoglio had settled hung over a branch broader than any street in Ombra, but once again he felt dizzy when he climbed down the ladder Doria had made him so that he wouldn't have to let himself down on a rope. On the Black Prince's orders, ropes woven by the robbers from bark and climbing plants had been stretched everywhere. In addition, the tree itself had so many air-roots and branches hanging down that there was always something to hold on to. Yet none of that could make you forget the deep void yawning under the slippery boughs. The fact is, Fenoglio, you're no squirrel, he told himself as he clung to a few woody shoots and peered down. But for an old man you're not doing too badly up here.

'They're hauling in the ropes!' Signora Loredan, unlike him, was surprisingly agile as she moved through the air along the wooden paths.

'I can see that for myself!' growled Fenoglio. They were hauling up all the ropes that went down to the foot of the tree. That boded no good.

Farid came climbing down to them. He often joined the guards posted by the Black Prince in the top branches of the tree. Heavens, how could any human being climb like that? The boy was almost as good at it as his marten.

'Torches! They're coming closer!' he said breathlessly. 'And do you hear the dog barking?' He looked accusingly at Fenoglio. 'Didn't you say no one knew about this tree? Didn't you claim it had been forgotten, and the nests with it?'

Blaming him. Of course. Something goes wrong, and it's all Fenoglio's fault!

'Well? Dogs find forgotten places too!' he snapped at the boy. 'Why not ask who wiped our tracks out? Where's the Black Prince?'

'Down on the ground with his bear. Trying to hide him. The stupid creature just refuses to be hauled up!'

Fenoglio listened. Sure enough, he heard dogs. Damn it, damn it, damn it!

‘So what about it?’ Of course Signora Loredan was acting as if none of it bothered her at all. ‘They can’t get us down, can they? A tree like this must be easy to defend!’

‘They can starve us out, though.’

Farid understood more about situations like this, and Elinor Loredan suddenly looked rather anxious after all. And who was she staring at?

‘Ah, so now I’m your last hope again, is that right?’ Fenoglio imitated her voice. ‘Write something, Fenoglio, go on! It can’t be all that difficult!’

The children clambered out of the nests where they slept. They ran along the branches as if they were meadow footpaths, peering down in alarm. They looked like pretty beetles in the gigantic tree. Poor little things.

Despina ran to Fenoglio. ‘They can’t get up the tree, can they?’

Her brother just looked at him.

‘Of course not,’ said Fenoglio, although Ivo’s eyes accused him of lying. Ivo was spending more and more time with Roxane’s son Jehan these days. The two boys got on well. They both knew too much about the world for lads of their age.

Farid took Meggie’s arm. ‘Battista says we ought to get the children into the top nests. Will you help me?’

Of course she nodded – she still liked him far too much – but Fenoglio held her back. ‘Meggie stays here. I might need her.’

Naturally, Farid immediately knew what he was talking about. In his black eyes Fenoglio saw the reborn Cosimo riding through the streets of Ombra, and the dead men lying among the trees in the Wayless Wood.

‘We don’t need your words!’ said the boy. ‘I’ll send fire raining down on them if they try to climb up!’

Fire? An alarming word in a forest.

‘Well, perhaps I can think of something better,’ said Fenoglio, and sensed Meggie’s desperate eyes on him. What about my father? they asked. Yes, what about him? Which set of words was more urgent now? Damn it, damn it, damn it!

A few of the children began crying, and below him Fenoglio saw the torches that Farid had mentioned. They shone in the night like fire-elves, but with far more menace.

Farid led Despina and Ivo away with him. The other children followed. Darius went to them, his thin hair untidy from sleep, and took the small hands that reached out in search of his. He glanced in concern at Elinor, but she just stood there staring darkly at the depths below, her hands clenched into fists.

‘Let them come!’ she said fiercely, her voice shaking. ‘I hope the bear will eat them all! I hope those men who hunt children will all be hacked to pieces!’

A lunatic of a woman, but she took the words right out of Fenoglio’s mouth. Meggie’s eyes were still fixed on him.

‘Why are you looking at me like that? What am I supposed to do, Meggie?’ he asked. ‘This story is telling itself in two places again. Which of them needs the words more urgently? Am I supposed to grow a second head, or—?’

He stopped abruptly.

Signora Loredan was still firing off a salvo of curses at the ground below. ‘Child-murderers! Vermin! Cockroaches in armour! You ought to be crushed underfoot!’

‘What was that you just said?’ Fenoglio sounded more brusque than he had intended.

Elinor looked at him blankly.

Crushed underfoot ...! Fenoglio stared at the torches down below. ‘Yes!’ he whispered. ‘Yes. It could be rather dangerous. But how am I to ...?’

He turned and swiftly climbed the ladder to his nest again. The nest where the words were hatched out. That was the place for him now.

But of course Loredan followed him.

‘You have an idea?’

He did, and he certainly wasn’t going to let her know that, once again, she had given it to him. ‘I have an idea, that’s right. Meggie, be ready, please.’

Rosenquartz handed him a pen. He was afraid, Fenoglio saw it in his glass face. It was a deeper pink than usual. Or had he been sneaking wine again? For the two glass men were now eating grated bark like their wild cousins, and the result was a little green mingling with Rosenquartz’s pale pink. Not a very good colour combination.

Fenoglio put a blank sheet of paper on the board that Doria had so cleverly cut to size for him. For heaven’s sake, he’d never yet managed to write two stories at once!

‘What about my father, Fenoglio?’ Meggie knelt down beside him. She looked so desperate!

‘He still has time.’ Fenoglio dipped his pen in the ink. ‘Get Farid to look into the fire if you’re worried, but I can assure you it’s not easy to repair a coach wheel in a hurry. The Adderhead won’t be at the castle for a day or so at the most. And I promise, as soon as I’ve dealt with what’s going on here I’ll get back to writing the words for the Bluejay. Don’t look so sad! How are you going to help him if the Milksop shoots us all out of this tree? Now, give me the book. You know the one I mean.’

He knew where to look. He had described them at the very beginning, in the third or fourth chapter.

‘Come on, tell us!’ Loredan’s voice was quivering with impatience. ‘What are you going to do?’ She came closer to get a look at the book, but Fenoglio slammed it shut in front of her nose.

‘Be quiet!’ he thundered, not that that made any difference to the noise coming in from outside. Was the Milksop here already?

Write, Fenoglio.

He closed his eyes. He could see him already. Very clearly. How exciting – given a task like this, writing was twice as much fun!

‘What I mean is—’

‘Elinor, do keep quiet!’ he heard Meggie say. And then the words came. Yes, this nest was a good place to write in.

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56

Fire and Darkness

What was Right, what was Wrong? What distinguished Doing from Not Doing? If I were to have my time again, the old King thought, I would bury myself in a monastery, for fear of a Doing which might lead to woe.

T.H. White,
The Once and Future King

‘How many did you count?’
‘Nearly fifty.’ They were trying hard to sound casual, but Violante’s child-soldiers were frightened, and Mo wondered – not for the first time – whether they had ever really fought before, or if they knew about war only from the deaths of their brothers and fathers.

‘Only fifty? Then he really does trust me!’ There was no mistaking the triumph in Violante’s voice. The Adderhead’s daughter thought nothing of fear. It was an emotion that she was very good at suppressing – one among many – and Mo read contempt in her eyes when she saw the fear on her young soldiers’ faces. But it could be seen on Brianna’s face too, and even on Tullio’s furry features.

‘Is the Milksop with him?’

The boys, as Mo still couldn’t help calling them, shook their heads.

‘What about the Piper? Surely he’s brought the Piper too, hasn’t he?’

More head-shaking. Mo exchanged a glance of surprise with Dustfinger.

‘To your posts!’ Violante ordered. ‘We’ve discussed it often enough. You don’t even let my father on to the bridge. He can send a single envoy, no more. We’ll keep him waiting for two or maybe three days. That’s what he himself does with his enemies.’

‘He won’t like that.’

‘He’s not meant to like it. Now, off you all go. I want to speak to the Bluejay alone.’ Violante cast Dustfinger an imperious glance. ‘*Entirely* alone.’

Dustfinger did not move. Only when Mo nodded to him did he turn and leave, as silently as if he were the other man’s shadow.

Violante went over to the window. They were in the room that had once been her mother’s. On the walls, unicorns grazed peacefully among the spotted cats that Mo had often seen in the forest, and the window had a view of the aviary courtyard, with the empty cages and painted nightingales, now faded by daylight. The Adderhead seemed far, far away, in another world.

‘So he hasn’t brought the Piper,’ said Violante. ‘All the better. I suppose he sent him back to the Castle of Night, to punish him for letting you escape.’

‘Do you really think so?’ Mo examined the peacefully grazing unicorns on the walls. They reminded him of other pictures, hunting scenes in which their white coats were pierced by lances. ‘Last night the White Women told me a different tale.’

He could still hear them whispering: *The Piper is preparing the way for him.*

‘Really? Well, be that as it may ... if he’s coming after all, then we must kill him too. We can let the others go, but not the Piper.’

Was she really so sure of herself?

Violante still had her back turned to him. ‘I’ll have to have you bound again. Otherwise my father isn’t likely to believe you’re really my prisoner.’

‘I know. Get Dustfinger to do it. He knows how to tie people up so that they can easily free themselves.’ He learnt it from a boy my daughter’s in love with, added Mo in his mind. Where was Meggie now? With her mother, he hoped. And with the Black Prince. In safety.

‘When my father is dead –’ Violante spoke the word cautiously, so perhaps she wasn’t so sure of succeeding as she made out – ‘the Milksop isn’t going to give up the throne of Ombra to me without a fight. He’ll probably get support from his sister in the Castle of Night. I hope you and I will still be allies?’ For the first time she looked at him.

What was he to say? *No, once your father is dead I’m going away.* Was he?

Violante turned her back to him again before asking her next question. ‘Do you really have a wife?’

‘Yes.’

Princes’ daughters have a soft spot for robbers and mountebanks.

‘Send her away. I’ll make you Prince of Ombra.’

Mo thought he heard Dustfinger laughing. ‘I’m no prince, Your Highness,’ he replied. ‘I’m a robber – and a bookbinder. Two parts are more than enough for one man to play.’

She turned again, and scrutinized him as if she couldn’t believe he meant it seriously. If only he could read her face better. But the mask Violante wore was even more inscrutable than those Battista made for performing his farces.

‘You don’t even want to think my offer over?’

‘As I said: two parts are enough,’ repeated Mo, and for a moment Violante’s face was so like her father’s that his heart missed a beat.

‘Very well. As you say,’ she said. ‘But I will ask you again when all this is over.’

She looked out of the window once more. ‘I’ve told my soldiers to shut you up in the tower called the Needle. I won’t consign you to one of the holes my grandfather used as dungeons. They’re built so that the lake can fill them with just enough water to keep prisoners from actually drowning.’ She looked at him, as if to see whether the idea frightened him. Yes, it does, thought Mo. So?

‘I will receive my father in the Hall of a Thousand Windows,’ Violante went on. ‘That’s where he came to court my mother. I’ll have you brought once I’m sure he has the White Book with him.’

The way she put her hands together – it was like a schoolgirl reciting in class. He still felt affection for her; she moved him. He wanted to protect her from all the pain of the past and the darkness in her own heart, although he knew no one could do that. Violante’s heart was a locked room, with dark pictures on the walls.

‘You will pretend that you can heal the White Book, just as we planned. I’ll have everything made ready – Balbulus has told

me what you'd need – and when you seem to be starting work I'll distract my father's attention so that you can write the three words. I'll make him angry. That's usually the best way to distract him. He has a savage temper. If we're lucky he won't even notice you're putting pen to paper. They say he has a new bodyguard, so that could be a problem. But I'm sure my men can deal with him.'

My men. They're children, thought Mo, but fortunately Dustfinger was here too. No sooner had the name come into his mind than Dustfinger himself stepped through the doorway.

'What do you want?' Violante snapped.

Dustfinger ignored her. 'It's very quiet out there,' he told Mo in a low voice. 'The Adderhead is taking the news that he's to be kept waiting surprisingly well. I don't like it.' He went back to the door and looked down the passage. 'Where are the guards?' he asked Violante.

'Where would they be? I sent them down to the bridge. But two of my men are stationed in the courtyard. Now it's time for you to play the part of my prisoner, Bluejay. Yet another part. You see? Sometimes there are more than two.' She went to the window and called to the guards, but only silence answered her.

Mo felt it at the same moment. He felt the story taking a new turn. Time suddenly seemed to weigh more heavily, and a strange uneasiness took hold of him. As if he were on stage and had missed his cue.

'Where are they?' Violante turned, and for a moment she looked almost as young and frightened as her soldiers. She went to the door and called for them again, but no one replied. Only the silence.

'Keep close to me!' Dustfinger whispered to Mo. 'Whatever happens. Fire is sometimes a better defence than the sword.'

Violante was still listening intently. The sound of footsteps was coming closer – stumbling, unsteady footsteps. Violante

stepped back from the door as if afraid of what was coming. The soldier who collapsed at her feet was covered with blood – his own blood. It was the boy who had let Mo out of the sarcophagus. Did he know more about killing now?

He stammered something that Mo didn't understand until he bent over him. 'The Piper ... they're everywhere.' The boy whispered more, but Mo couldn't make it out. He died with the faltering words still on his lips, mingling with his blood.

'Is there another entrance? One you haven't told us about?' Dustfinger seized Violante's arm roughly.

'No!' she stammered. 'No!' And she tore herself away from him as if it were he who had killed the boy at her feet.

Mo reached for her hand and led her out into the corridor, away from the voices suddenly echoing through the silent castle on all sides. But their flight ended at the next set of steps. Dustfinger sent his marten scurrying off as soldiers barred their way, bloodstained men who hadn't been boys for a long time. Aiming crossbows at them, they drove them to the hall where Violante's mother and her sisters had learnt to dance in front of a dozen silver mirrors. Now the Piper was reflected in them.

'Well, well, isn't the prisoner in chains? How careless, Your Ugliness.' As always, the silver-nosed man held himself erect, proud as a peacock. But Mo was less surprised by the sight of him than by seeing the man at his side. Orpheus. He had never expected Orpheus to come here. He had forgotten him as soon as Dustfinger told him how he had taken the book, and all the words in it, away from him. *You're a fool, Mortimer*. As so often, his face showed what he was thinking, and Orpheus gloated over his surprise.

'How did you get into the castle?' Violante pushed away the men holding her, and went up to the Piper, who might have been no more than an uninvited guest. His soldiers retreated before her as if they had forgotten who their master was. The

Adderhead's daughter – it was a mighty title, even if she was the ugly daughter.

However, it did not impress the Piper. 'Your father knew a more comfortable way in than that draughty bridge,' he replied in a world-weary tone. 'He thought you didn't know it, so it wouldn't be guarded. Obviously it was your grandfather's best-kept secret, but in fact it was your mother who showed it to your father when she stole away from this castle with him. A romantic story, don't you think?'

'You're lying!' Violante looked around like a hunted animal, but all she saw was her own reflection next to the Piper's.

'Really? Your men know better. I haven't had them all killed. Boys like them make excellent soldiers, because they still think themselves immortal.' He took a step towards Mo.

'I could hardly wait to see you again, Bluejay. "Send me on ahead," I asked the Adderhead. "So that I can catch you the bird who flew away from me. I'll stalk him like a cat, along secret ways, and seize him while he's still looking out just for you."' "

Mo wasn't listening. He read Dustfinger's thoughts as if they were his own. *Now, Bluejay!* they whispered, and as a fiery snake crawled up the legs of the soldier on his right he drove his elbow into the chest of the man behind him. Fire licked up from the floor, baring teeth of flame and setting light to the clothes of the men guarding them. Screaming, they staggered back, while the fire formed a protective ring around their two prisoners. Two soldiers raised their crossbows, but the Piper struck down their arms. He knew his master would not forgive him once more if he brought him the Bluejay dead. His face was pale with rage. But Orpheus smiled.

'Very impressive! It really is!' He went up to the fire and inspected the flames intently as if to find out how Dustfinger summoned them up. But then his gaze went to Dustfinger himself.

‘No doubt you really could rescue the bookbinder all by yourself,’ he said gently. ‘But unluckily for him, you’ve made an enemy of me. What a mistake. I didn’t come with the Piper. I serve his master now. He’s waiting for night to fall before paying a call on the Bluejay, and he sent me ahead to prepare everything for his arrival. Including, among other things, the sad task of dispatching the Fire-Dancer to the realm of Death for the last time.’

The regret in his voice sounded almost genuine, and Mo remembered the day in Elinor’s library when Orpheus had bargained with Mortola for Dustfinger’s life.

‘That’s enough talking. Get rid of him, Four-Eyes!’ cried the Piper impatiently, as his men tore off their burning clothes. ‘I want to get my hands on the Bluejay at last!’

‘Yes, yes, you’ll have him in a minute!’ replied Orpheus. He sounded irritated. ‘But first I want my share!’

He came so close to the fire that its light reddened his pale face.

‘Who did you give Fenoglio’s book to?’ he asked Dustfinger through the flames. ‘Him?’ He nodded in Mo’s direction.

‘Maybe,’ replied Dustfinger, and smiled.

Orpheus bit his lip like a child who has to hold back tears. ‘Very well, smile away!’ he said huskily. ‘Mock me! But you’ll soon be sorry for what you did to me.’

‘Will I?’ replied Dustfinger, unmoved, as if the soldiers still aiming crossbows at them were not there at all. ‘How are you going to frighten a man who’s died once already?’

This time it was Orpheus who smiled, and Mo wished he had a sword, even though he knew that it wouldn’t help him.

‘Piper, what is this man doing here? Since when has he served my fa ...’ Violante’s voice died away as Orpheus’s shadow moved, like an animal waking from sleep.

A shape grew out of it, panting like a large dog. No face could be made out in that blurred, pulsating blackness, only eyes, cloudy and angry. Mo felt Dustfinger's fear, and the fire died down as if the dark figure had taken its breath away.

'I don't suppose I have to explain what a Night-Mare is, do I?' said Orpheus in a velvety voice. 'The strolling players say they are the dead sent back by the White Women because even they couldn't wash the dark stains from their souls. So they condemn them to wander without human bodies, driven by their own darkness, in a world that is no longer theirs ... until they are finally extinguished, eaten away by the air they can't breathe, burnt by the sun from which no body protects them. But until that happens they are like hungry dogs – very hungry.'

He took a step back. 'Take him!' he told the shadowy form. 'Get him, good dog! Take the Fire-Eater for your own, because he broke my heart.'

Mo moved closer to Dustfinger's side, but Dustfinger pushed him back. 'Get away, Bluejay!' he said sharply. 'This thing is worse than death!' The flames around them went out, and the Night-Mare, breathing heavily, stepped into the soot-ringed circle. Dustfinger did not shrink from it. He simply stood there as the shapeless hands reached for him, and then the life just went out of him, extinguished like a flame.

Mo felt as if his own heart stopped when the other man fell. But the Night-Mare bent over Dustfinger's motionless body, snuffling like a disappointed dog, and Mo remembered something that Battista had once told him: Night-Mares were interested only in living flesh and avoided the dead, fearing to be taken back by them to the realm they had escaped for a short time.

'Oh, what happened?' cried Orpheus. He sounded like a disappointed child. 'Why was it so quick? I wanted to watch him dying for longer!'

‘Seize the Bluejay!’ Mo heard the Piper calling. ‘Go on, do it!’ But his soldiers just stared at the Night-Mare. It had turned, and its dull gaze was now bent on Mo.

‘Orpheus! Call it off!’ The Piper’s voice almost cracked. ‘We still need the Bluejay!’

The Night-Mare moaned as if its mouth were trying to find words – if it had a mouth at all. For a second Mo thought he could make out a face in the blackness. Evil seeped through his skin, covering his heart like mildew. His legs gave way, and he struggled desperately for breath. Dustfinger had been right; the creature was worse than death.

‘Back, dog!’ Orpheus’s voice made the Night-Mare freeze. ‘You don’t get him until later.’

Mo fell to his knees beside Dustfinger’s motionless body. He wanted to lie down beside him, to stop breathing too, stop feeling, but the soldiers hauled him up and bound his hands. He hardly felt it. He could still barely breathe.

When the Piper came up to him, Mo saw him as if through a veil. ‘Somewhere in this castle they say there’s a courtyard, an aviary with bird cages in it. Put him in one of those.’ He drove his elbow into Mo’s stomach, but all Mo felt was that he could breathe again as the Night-Mare withdrew, merging with Orpheus’s shadow.

‘Stop! The Bluejay is still my prisoner!’ Violante barred the soldiers’ way as they were dragging Mo along with them.

But the Piper pushed her roughly aside. ‘He was never your prisoner,’ he said. ‘Just how stupid do you think your father is? Take her to her room!’ he ordered one of the soldiers. ‘And throw the Fire-Dancer into the courtyard, outside the cage where you lock up the Bluejay. After all, we shouldn’t part a shadow from its master, should we?’

Another of Violante’s soldiers was lying outside the door, his young face showing his terror as he saw death coming. They lay

everywhere. The Castle in the Lake – and the Bluejay with it – belonged to the Adderhead. So that was how the song ended.

‘What a terrible ending!’ Mo could almost hear Meggie saying. ‘I don’t want to listen to this book, Mo. Don’t you have another story?’

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57

Too Late

‘Rat,’ said the Mole, ‘I simply can’t go and turn in, and go to sleep, and *do* nothing, even though there doesn’t seem to be anything to be done.’

**Kenneth Grahame,
*The Wind in the Willows***

The lake. Resa wanted to run when she saw the water shining through the trees at the foot of the slope, but the Strong Man held her back, pointing without a word to the tents lining the bank. The black tent could belong to only one man, and Resa leant against one of the trees growing on the steep hillside and felt all her strength failing her. They were too late. The Adderhead had reached this place before them. Now what?

She looked at the castle lying there in the middle of the lake, like a black fruit that the Silver Prince was about to pluck. Its

dark walls looked menacing – and inaccessible. Was Mo really there? Even if he was, so was the Adderhead. And the bridge leading across the lake to it was guarded by a dozen soldiers. Now what, Resa?

‘We can’t go over the bridge, that’s for sure,’ the Strong Man whispered to her. ‘I’ll have a look around. You wait here. Maybe there’s a boat somewhere.’

But Resa hadn’t come all this way to wait. It was difficult finding a way over the steep slopes by the banks, and there were soldiers stationed everywhere among the trees, but their eyes were on the castle. The Strong Man led her away from the tents to the eastern bank of the lake, where trees grew all the way down to the water. Perhaps they could try to swim across the lake under cover of darkness? But it would be cold, very cold, and there were grim stories about the water of this lake and the creatures living in it. Resa’s hand went to the child in her belly as she followed the Strong Man. She felt as if it had gone into hiding deep inside her.

Suddenly the Strong Man took her arm and pointed to some rocks projecting into the lake. Two soldiers emerged among them, as suddenly as if they had come up out of the water. As they climbed to the bank, Resa saw horses waiting under the spruce trees only a few paces from the rocks.

‘What does that mean?’ whispered the Strong Man as even more soldiers appeared on the rocks. ‘Can there be another way into the castle? I’ll go and look. But you’re not coming with me this time. Please! I promised the Bluejay. He’d punch my nose in anyway if he knew you were here.’

‘No, he wouldn’t,’ Resa whispered back, but she stayed where she was, and the Strong Man slipped away as she stood under the trees, freezing, and watching him go. The water of the lake was lapping on the bank almost to the toes of her boots, and she thought she could see faces under the mirrorlike surface,

faces pressed flat like patterns on the back of a ray. Shuddering, she retreated – and heard footsteps behind her.

‘Hey, you there.’

She spun round. A soldier was standing among the trees, sword in hand. Run, Resa!

She was faster than he was, with his weapons and heavy shirt of mail, but he called another man up, and this one had a crossbow. Faster, Resa! From tree to tree, hiding and then running, as children do. As she would have played with Meggie if she’d been there when her daughter was still small. All those years missed ...

An arrow drove into the tree beside her. Another buried itself in the ground just in front of her feet. *Don’t follow me, Resa. I have to know you’ll be there when I come back.* Oh, Mo. It’s so much harder to wait, just to keep on waiting.

She ducked behind a tree and drew her knife. They were coming closer, weren’t they? Run on, Resa. But her legs were weak with fear. Breathing heavily, she staggered to the shelter of the next tree – and felt a large hand over her mouth.

‘Call and tell them you’re surrendering!’ the Strong Man whispered. ‘But don’t go towards them. Make them come to you.’

Resa nodded and put the knife away. The two soldiers called something to each other. She felt sick with fear as she put out her arm from behind the tree and asked them not to shoot, her voice trembling. She waited until the Strong Man had crawled away – with astonishing agility for a man of his size – before she emerged from the shelter of the tree with her hands in the air. The eyes under the soldiers’ helmets widened in surprise as they saw she was a woman. Their smiles boded no good, even though they lowered their weapons, but before one of them could grab her, the Strong Man was behind them, and winding an arm around the neck of each. Resa turned away as he killed

them. She threw up in the damp grass, hand pressed to her belly, afraid the child had sensed her terror.

‘They’re all over the place!’ The Strong Man pulled her to her feet. His shoulder was bleeding so freely that it dyed his shirt red. ‘One of them had a knife. “Watch out for knives, Lazaro,” that’s what Doria always says. That little fellow’s far cleverer than me.’ He was swaying so much that Resa had to support him. They staggered on together, further into the trees.

‘The Piper is here too,’ the Strong Man whispered. ‘Those were his men we saw on the rocks. Seems there’s a tunnel under the lake there, all the way to the castle. And I’m afraid there’s more bad news.’

He looked round. Voices came over from the banks of the lake. Suppose the men’s bodies were found? The Strong Man led her to a burrow in the ground that smelt of brownies.

Resa heard the sobbing as soon as she made her way into it. The Strong Man was groaning as he crawled in after her. Something furry crouched there in the darkness. At first Resa thought it really was a brownie. Then she remembered the description Meggie had given her of Violante’s servant. What was his name? Yes, Tullio.

She reached for the furry hand. Violante’s servant stared at her, eyes wide with fear.

‘What’s happened? I’m the Bluejay’s wife! Please, is he still alive?’

He went on staring at her with his dark eyes, which were round like an animal’s. ‘They’re all dead,’ he whispered. Resa’s heart began to falter as if it had forgotten how to beat. ‘There’s blood everywhere. They’ve locked Violante in her room, and as for the Bluejay ...’

What had they done to him? No, she didn’t want to hear. Resa closed her eyes as if that would take her back to Elinor’s house, the peaceful garden, where she could go over to Mo’s workshop ...

‘The Piper has shut him up in a cage.’

‘Does that mean he’s still alive?’

The quick nod allowed her heart to beat more regularly again.

‘They still need him!’

Of course. How could she have forgotten?

‘But the Night-Mare has eaten the Fire-Dancer.’

Oh no. It couldn’t be true. Resa buried her face in her hands.

‘Is the Adderhead already in the castle?’ the Strong Man asked.

Tullio shook his head and began sobbing again.

The Strong Man looked at Resa. ‘Then he’ll be riding over tonight. And the Bluejay will kill him.’ It sounded as if he were reciting a magic spell.

‘How?’ Resa cut a strip of fabric from his tunic with her knife and bandaged his wound, which was still bleeding hard. ‘How is he going to write the words if Violante can’t help him any more and Dustfinger is ...’ She did not utter the word ‘dead’, as if she could make it untrue by leaving it unspoken.

Footsteps could be heard outside, but they moved away again. Resa undid Mortola’s bag from her belt.

‘No, Lazaro,’ she said softly – it was the first time she had used the Strong Man’s name. ‘The Bluejay will not kill the Adderhead. They will kill *him*, once the Adderhead finds out that Mo can’t cure the White Book. And that will be very soon.’

She sprinkled a few of the tiny seeds into her hand. Seeds that taught the soul what only Death could usually teach: how to take on another form.

‘What are you doing?’ The Strong Man tried to take the bag away from her, but Resa clutched it in both hands.

‘You have to place them under your tongue,’ she whispered, ‘and take care not to swallow them. For if you do that too often

the animal will grow too strong, and you forget what you were before. Capricorn had a dog that was said to have been one of his men once, until Mortola tried out these seeds on him. A day came when the dog attacked her, and they killed it. At the time I thought it was just a story to scare the maids.'

She shook all but four of the seeds back into the bag. Four tiny seeds, almost round like poppy seeds, but lighter in colour. 'Take Tullio and go back to the cave!' she told the Strong Man. 'Tell the Black Prince what we saw. Tell him about Snapper too. And take care of Meggie!'

He was looking at her unhappily.

'You can't help me here, Lazaro!' she whispered. 'You can't help either me or the Bluejay. Go back and protect our daughter. And comfort Roxane. Or – no, perhaps you'd better not tell her anything yet. I'll do it myself.'

She licked the seeds up from her hand. 'You never know what kind of creature you'll turn into,' she whispered. 'But I hope it will have wings.'



58

Help from Mountains Far Away

He thinks of the old days, when everything was created. It was so long ago! He and his brothers killed the monstrous giant Ymer then and made the whole world from his corpse. His blood became the sea, his flesh the land, mountains and cliffs arose from his bones, trees and grass grew out of his hair.

Tor Age Bringsværd,
The Wild Gods

Meggie waited ... while her ears were filled with screams. While Farid put out Sootbird's black fire with white flames. While Darius soothed the children by telling them stories, his soft voice louder than usual to drown out the noise of fighting, and Elinor helped the other women to cut the ropes that the Milksop's men had shot up into the tree on arrows.

Meggie waited, quietly singing the songs Battista had taught her – all the songs full of hope and light, defiance and courage – while down at the foot of the tree the robbers were fighting for the children's lives and their own. Every scream reminded Meggie of the battle in the forest in which Farid had died. But this time she feared for two boys, not one.

Her eyes didn't know who to look for first, Farid or Doria, black hair or brown. Sometimes she couldn't see either of them, they moved so fast in the branches, both of them following the fire that Sootbird sent up into the huge tree like burning tar. Doria beat it out with cloths and mats, while Farid mocked Sootbird from above and sent his own flames to nest on the murderous fire like doves until their fiery plumage smothered it. He had learnt a great deal from Dustfinger. Farid was no novice now, and Meggie saw jealousy distort Sootbird's leathery face, while the Milksop sat on his horse among the trees, observing the fighting men with as little expression on his face as if he were watching his hounds bring down a stag.

The robbers were still defending the tree, even though they were hopelessly outnumbered. But how much longer could they fight?

Where was he? Where was the creature she and Fenoglio had called to their aid? It had all been so quick with Cosimo!

No one knew what Meggie had read aloud a few hours ago except Fenoglio and the two glass men, who had listened to her open-mouthed. They hadn't even had a chance to tell Elinor about it, since the Milksop's attack had been so sudden.

'You have to give him time!' Fenoglio had told Meggie when she put down the sheet of paper bearing his words. 'He has to come from far away, or it couldn't be done.'

Just so long as he didn't arrive only after they were all dead ...

The Black Prince was bleeding from his shoulder. Almost all the robbers were wounded by now. It would be too late. Too

late.

Meggie saw Doria just avoiding an arrow, Roxane comforting the crying children, and Elinor and Minerva desperately trying to cut another rope before the Milksop's men could climb it. Oh, when would he come? When?

And, suddenly, she felt the sensation, exactly as Fenoglio had described it: a trembling that shook the tree to its topmost branches. Everyone felt it. The men fighting stopped and looked at each other in alarm. *The ground quivered beneath his footsteps.* That was what Fenoglio had written.

'Are you really sure he'll be peaceful?' Meggie had asked anxiously.

'Of course I am!' Fenoglio had replied in some annoyance. But Meggie couldn't help thinking of Cosimo, who hadn't turned out as Fenoglio imagined him. Or had he? Who could say what exactly went on in the old man's head? Perhaps Elinor was more likely to guess than the rest of them.

The quivering grew stronger. Branches broke, shoots, saplings. Flocks of birds flew up from the undergrowth, and the battle cries under the tree turned to screams of terror as the giant pushed his way out of the thickets.

No, he wasn't as tall as the tree.

'Of course not!' Fenoglio had said. 'Of course they're not as tall as *that!* It would be silly! Anyway, didn't I tell you these nests were built on purpose to keep the people who lived in them safe from the giants? Well, there you are! He won't be able to reach up to any of them, but the Milksop will run for it as soon as he sees the giant, that's for sure. He'll run as fast as his spindly legs can carry him!'

And that was what the Milksop did, although he left it to his horse to do the running. He was the first to turn and flee. Sootbird was so terrified that he burnt himself on his own flames, and the robbers themselves stood firm only because the Black Prince made them. It was Elinor who let the first rope

down to the men and snapped at the other women as they stood there, petrified, staring at the giant. 'Throw down ropes!' Meggie heard her shouting. 'And get on with it, or do you want him to crush them underfoot?'

Brave Elinor.

The robbers began climbing, while the screams of the soldiers rang through the forest, retreating further into the distance all the time. However, now it was the giant's turn to stop and stare up at the children, who in turn were staring down at him with both delight and terror on their little faces.

'They like human children. That's the problem,' Fenoglio had murmured to Meggie before she began to read. 'After a time they begin catching them, like butterflies or hamsters. But I've tried to write one here who's too lethargic to do that. Although it presumably means he won't be a very clever specimen.'

Did the giant look clever? Meggie couldn't say. She had imagined him as quite different. His mighty limbs were not grossly massive, and he moved only a little more ponderously than the Strong Man. For a moment, as he stood there among the trees, it seemed to Meggie that he, not the robbers, was the right size for this forest. His eyes were strange. They were rounder than human eyes, and rather like a chameleon's. The same could be said of his skin. The giant was naked, like the fairies and elves, and his skin changed colour with every movement he made. When he first appeared it had been pale brown, like the bark of a tree, but now it was patterned with red like the last of the berries hanging in an almost leafless hawthorn bush that came up to his knees. Even his hair changed colour – sometimes green, then suddenly pale like the sky. All this made him almost invisible among the trees. As if the air were moving. As if the wind, or the spirit of this forest, had taken visible shape in him.

'Aha! Here he is at last! Fabulous!' Fenoglio appeared behind Meggie so suddenly that she almost stumbled off the branch

where she was standing. 'Yes, we know our craft, you and I! I wouldn't say a word against your father, but in my view you're the true mistress of this art. You're still child enough to see the pictures behind the words as clearly as only children can. Which is probably why this giant doesn't look at all the way I imagined him.'

'But I didn't imagine him like this either,' Meggie said in a whisper, as if any loud word might attract the giant's attention.

'Really? Hm.' Fenoglio took a cautious step forward. 'Well, never mind that. I can't wait to hear what Signora Loredan thinks of him, I really can't.'

Meggie could see what Doria, for one, thought of the giant. He was perched in the crown of the tree and couldn't take his eyes off the apparition. And Farid was looking as captivated as he usually did only when Dustfinger was showing him a new trick, while Jink, sitting on his lap, bared his teeth in alarm.

Meggie felt pleased. She had done it again! She had used Fenoglio's words and her voice to go on telling the story. And, as on those other occasions, she felt exhausted and proud at the same time – and a little afraid of what she had summoned up.

'So now do you have the words for my father ready?'

'The words for your father? No, but I'm working on them.' Fenoglio rubbed his lined forehead as if he had to wake up a few thoughts slumbering there. 'I'm afraid a giant wouldn't be much help to your father, but trust me. I'll get that done tonight too. When the Adderhead reaches the castle Violante will receive him with my words, and the two of us will bring this story to a good ending once and for all. Oh, he really is magnificent!' Fenoglio leant forward to get a better look at his creation. 'Although I wonder where he gets those chameleon eyes. I never wrote a word about them! Never mind, it makes him look ... well, interesting. Perhaps I ought to write a few more giants like him here. It's a shame they hide away in the mountains now.'

The robbers did not appear to agree with him. They were still climbing the ropes as hastily as if the Milksop's men were after them. By now only the Black Prince and his bear stood at the foot of the tree.

‘What’s the Prince doing still down there?’ Fenoglio leant so far forward that Meggie instinctively grabbed his tunic. ‘For heaven’s sake, why doesn’t he leave the damn bear alone? These giants don’t have particularly good eyesight. He’ll be trodden underfoot if the giant stumbles just once!’

Meggie tried to haul the old man back. ‘The Black Prince would never leave the bear alone, you know he wouldn’t!’

‘But he must!’ She had seldom seen Fenoglio so concerned. Obviously he really was fonder of the Prince than most of his characters.

‘Come on up!’ he called down to him. ‘Come on, Prince!’

But the Black Prince went on talking to his bear as if the animal were a sulky child, while the giant stood there staring up at the children. Several women shrieked when he reached out his hand. They pulled the children away, but however far the giant stretched, his mighty fingers couldn’t reach the nests, just as Fenoglio had said.

‘Made to measure!’ the old man whispered. ‘See that, Meggie?’ Yes, this time he obviously had thought of everything.

The giant looked disappointed. He reached up once more, and then took a step to one side. His heel missed the Black Prince by no more than a twig’s breadth. The bear roared and stood up on his hind legs – and the giant, in surprise, looked down at what was there between his feet.

‘Oh, no!’ faltered Fenoglio. ‘No, no, no!’ he shouted down to his creation. ‘Not him! Leave the Prince alone. That’s not what you’re here for! Go after the Milksop. Take some of his men, if you want anyone! Go on, go away!’

The giant raised his head, looking to see who was shouting like that, but then he bent and picked up the Prince and the bear with as little ceremony as Elinor picking caterpillars off her roses.

‘No!’ stammered Fenoglio. ‘What’s going on now? What went wrong this time? He’ll break every bone in the Prince’s body!’

The robbers hung from their ropes, frozen rigid. One of them threw his knife down at the giant’s hand. The giant pulled it out with his lips like a thorn and dropped the Black Prince as he might have dropped a toy. Meggie flinched as he struck the ground and lay there without moving. She heard Elinor scream, while the giant hit out at the men on the ropes as if they were wasps trying to sting him.

Everyone was shouting in confusion. Battista ran to one of the ropes to go to the Prince’s aid. Farid and Doria followed him, and even Elinor ran after him, while Roxane stood there, horrified, with her arms around two crying children. As for Fenoglio, he was shaking at the ropes hanging from the tree in helpless fury.

‘No!’ he shouted down once more. ‘No, you just can’t do that!’

And suddenly one of the ropes tore away and he fell into the void below. Meggie tried to grab him, but she arrived too late. Fenoglio was falling, with an expression of surprise on his wrinkled face, and the giant caught him in mid-air like a ripe fruit dropping from the tree.

The children had stopped screaming. The women and the robbers were silent too as the giant sat down at the foot of the tree and examined his catch. He put the bear carelessly on the ground, but as he did so his glance fell on the unconscious Prince, and he picked him up again. Roaring, the bear went to his master’s aid, but the giant just flicked him away with his hand. Then he rose to his feet, looked up at the children one last time, and strode away with Fenoglio in his right hand and

the Black Prince in his left.



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The Bluejay's Angels

I ask you:

What would you do if you were me? Tell me. Please tell me!

But you're far from this. Your fingers turn the strangeness of these pages that somehow connect my life to yours. Your eyes are safe. The story is just another few hundred pages of your mind. For me, it's here. It's now.

Markus Zusak,
I Am the Messenger

Orpheus had seen Violante for the first time at one of the Milksop's banquets, and even then he had wondered what it would be like to rule Ombra at her side. All his maids were more beautiful than the Adderhead's daughter, but

Violante had something that they did not possess: arrogance, ambition, the lust for power. All of that appealed to Orpheus, and when the Piper led her into the Hall of a Thousand Windows his heart beat faster as he saw how high she still held her head, even though she had staked everything on a single card and lost.

Her gaze passed over them all as if they were the losers – her father, Thumbling, the Piper. She had only a fleeting glance for Orpheus, but never mind. How was she to know what a prominent part he would play in the future? The Adderhead would still be stuck in the mud with a broken wheel if he hadn't read him four new coach wheels on the spot. How everyone had stared! Even Thumbling had learnt to respect him.

The Hall of a Thousand Windows had no windows any more. Thumbling had had them draped with black cloth, and only half a dozen torches gave light in the darkness, just enough of it to show the Adderhead the face of his worst enemy.

When they pushed Mortimer in, Violante's haughty mask cracked, but she quickly pulled herself together. Orpheus saw, with satisfaction, that they had not treated the Bluejay particularly gently, but he could still stand, and the Piper had certainly made sure his hands were unharmed. They could have cut out his tongue, though, thought Orpheus, thus putting an end to all the fulsome praise of his voice once and for all. But then it occurred to him that Mortimer still had to tell him where Fenoglio's book was, since Dustfinger hadn't given its whereabouts away.

The torchlight fell only on Mortimer. The Adderhead sat in darkness. He clearly didn't want to give his prisoner the satisfaction of seeing his bloated body. Anyone could smell it, though.

'Well, Bluejay? Did my daughter describe this meeting of ours rather differently to you? Very likely.' The Adderhead's breath rattled in his throat like an old man's. 'I was very glad when

Violante suggested this castle as our meeting place, although the journey here wasn't easy. The castle gave me happiness once before, if not for very long. And I was sure that her mother hadn't told her about the secret passage. She told her daughter a great deal about this castle, but little of it had anything to do with reality.'

Violante's face remained expressionless. 'I don't know what you're talking about, Father,' she said. What an effort she was making not to look at Mortimer. Touching.

'No, you don't know anything, that's the point.' The Adderhead laughed. 'I often had people posted to overhear what your mother told you in the Old Chamber. All the stories about her happy childhood days, the sweet lies told to make her ugly little daughter dream of a place so different from the castle where she really grew up. Reality isn't usually much like what we say about it, but you always confused the words with the truth. Just the same as your mother – you could never distinguish between what you want and the way things really are, could you?'

Violante did not reply. She simply stood there, as upright as ever, staring into the darkness where her father was concealed.

'When I met your mother for the first time in this hall,' the Adderhead went on in his hoarse voice, 'she wanted nothing but to get away from here. She'd have tried to run away if her father had given her any chance. Did she tell you that one of her sisters fell to her death climbing out of one of these windows? Or that she herself was almost drowned by the water-nymphs when she tried swimming across the lake? Presumably not. Instead, she made out that I forced her father to give me her hand in marriage, and took her away from here against her will. Who knows, perhaps she even believed that story herself in the end?'

'You're lying.' Violante was trying very hard to sound composed. 'I don't want to hear any more.'

‘But hear it you will,’ said the Adderhead, unmoved. ‘It’s time you stopped hiding behind pretty stories and heard the facts. Your grandfather was only too inclined to make sure that any suitors of his daughters disappeared. So your mother showed me the tunnel – the one that enabled the Piper to get into the castle entirely unnoticed. She was madly in love with me at the time, whatever she may have said to you.’

‘Why are you telling me these lies?’ Violante still held her head high, but her voice was trembling. ‘It wasn’t my mother who showed you the tunnel. It must have been one of your spies. And she never loved you, either.’

‘Believe what you like. I assume you don’t know very much about love.’ The Adderhead coughed, and rose from the chair where he was sitting with a groan. Violante retreated as he stepped into the torchlight.

‘Yes, see what your noble robber has done to me,’ said the Adderhead as he slowly approached Mortimer. It was getting more and more painful for him to walk, Orpheus had seen that often enough on the endless journey to this bleak castle, but the Silver Prince still stood as straight as his daughter.

‘But let’s not discuss the past any more,’ he said, when he was so close to Mortimer that his prisoner had the full benefit of the odour he gave off, ‘or about the way my daughter may have envisaged this bargain. Convince me that it really doesn’t make sense for me to flay you alive at once – and do the same to your wife and daughter. Yes, you left them with the Black Prince, but I know about the cave where they’re hiding. I assume that my useless brother-in-law has captured them by now and will be taking them to Ombra.’

Ah, that really got through to Mortimer. Guess who told the Adderhead about the cave, noble robber, thought Orpheus, smiling broadly when Mortimer looked at him.

‘So now ...’ The Adderhead drove his gloved fist into his prisoner’s chest just where Mortola had wounded him. ‘What

are the prospects? Can you reverse your own trick? Can you cure the Book you so craftily used to deceive me?’

Mortimer hesitated for only a moment. ‘Of course,’ he replied. ‘If you give it to me.’

Very well. Orpheus had to admit that Mortimer’s voice still sounded impressive, even in these dire straits (although his own sounded far, far better). But the Adderhead wasn’t to be beguiled this time. He struck Mortimer in the face so hard that he fell to his knees.

‘Do you seriously expect to fool me again?’ he snarled. ‘How stupid do you think I am? No one can cure this book! Dozens of your fellow craftsmen have died to give me that information. No, it’s past saving, which means that my flesh will rot for all eternity, and every day I’ll be tempted to write the three words in it myself and put an end to all this. But I have thought of a better solution, and I’ll require your services for it once more after all, which is why I am truly grateful to my daughter for taking such good care of you. After all,’ he added, glancing at the Piper, ‘I know what a hot temper my silver-nosed herald has.’

The Piper was going to say something, but the Adderhead merely raised his hand impatiently and turned back to Mortimer.

‘What kind of solution?’ The famous voice sounded hoarse. Was the Bluejay afraid now after all? Orpheus felt like a boy enjoying a particularly exciting passage in a book. I hope he’s afraid, he thought. And I hope this is one of the last chapters he appears in.

Mortimer’s face twisted when the Piper pressed his knife against his ribs. Oh yes, he’s obviously made the wrong enemies in this story, thought Orpheus. And the wrong friends. But that was high-minded heroes for you. Stupid.

‘What kind of solution?’ The Adderhead scratched his itching flesh. ‘You’ll bind me another book, what else? But this time

you won't go unobserved for a single second. And once this new book with its spotlessly white pages protects me from Death again, we'll write your name in the other one – so that you can know for a while how it feels to be rotting alive. After that I'll tear it to pieces, page by page, and watch as you feel your flesh tearing and you beg the White Women to come for you. Doesn't that sound like a solution satisfactory to all parties?'

Ah. A new White Book. Not a bad idea, thought Orpheus. But my name would suit its brand-new pages so much better! Stop dreaming, Orpheus, he told himself.

The Piper had his knife to Mortimer's throat. 'Well, what's your answer, Bluejay? Want me to carve it into you with my knife?'

Mortimer said nothing.

'Answer!' the Piper snarled at him. 'Or shall I do it for you? There's only one answer, anyway.'

Mortimer still said nothing, but Violante appointed herself to speak for him. 'Why should he help you if you're going to kill him in any case?' she asked her father.

The Adderhead shrugged his heavy shoulders. 'I could let him die in a rather less painful way, or just send his wife and daughter to the mines instead of killing them. After all, we've bargained for those two once before.'

'But this time they're not in your hands.' Mortimer's voice sounded as if he were very far away. He's going to say no, thought Orpheus in astonishment. What a fool.

'Not yet, but they soon will be.' The Piper let his knife slide down Mortimer's chest, and its point traced a heart over the place where the real one beat. 'Orpheus has given us a very detailed description of the place where they're hiding. You heard. The Milksoop is presumably taking them to Ombra at this very moment.'

For the second time Mortimer looked at Orpheus, and the hatred in his eyes was sweeter than the little cakes that Oss was sent to buy for him in Ombra market every Friday. Well, there'd be no more Oss now. Unfortunately the Night-Mare had eaten him when it slipped out of Fenoglio's words – it had taken Orpheus some time to get it under control. But he could always find a new bodyguard.

'You can get down to work at once. Your noble patroness, very usefully, has made sure everything you'll need is here!' spat the Piper, and this time blood flowed when he pressed his knife against Mortimer's throat. 'Obviously she wanted to provide every last detail to make us think you were really still alive only to cure the Book. What a farce. Ah, well, she always had a weakness for strolling players.'

Mortimer ignored the Piper as if he were invisible. He looked only at the Adderhead. 'No,' he said. The word hung heavily in the dark hall. 'I will not bind you another book. Death would not forgive me a second time for that.'

Violante instinctively took a step towards Mortimer, but he took no notice of her.

'Don't listen to him!' she told her father. 'He'll do it! Just give him a little time.' Oh, so she really was fond of the Bluejay. Orpheus frowned. One more reason to wish him to the devil.

The Adderhead looked thoughtfully at his daughter. 'Why would you want him to do it?'

'Well, you ...' For the first time Violante's voice betrayed uncertainty. 'He'll make you well again.'

'So?' The Silver Prince was breathing heavily. 'You want to see me dead. Don't deny it. I like that! It shows that my blood flows in your veins. Sometimes I think I really should put you on the throne of Ombra. You'd certainly fill the position better than my silver-powdered brother-in-law.'

'Of course I would! I'd send six times as much silver to the Castle of Night, because I wouldn't be squandering it on

banquets and hunting parties. But for that you must leave me the Bluejay – once he's done what you want.'

Impressive. She was actually still making conditions. Oh yes, I like her, thought Orpheus. I like her very much. She just has to have her weakness for lawless bookbinders driven out of her. But then ... what possibilities!

Obviously the Adderhead was appreciating his daughter more and more as well. He laughed louder than Orpheus had ever heard him laugh before. 'Look at her!' he cried. 'Bargaining with me even though she stands there empty-handed! Take her to her room,' he ordered one of his soldiers. 'But watch her carefully. And send Jacopo to her. A son should be with his mother. You, however,' he said, turning to Mortimer, 'will finally agree to my demand, or I'll have my bodyguard torture a 'yes' out of you.'

The Piper, aggrieved, lowered his knife when Thumbling stepped out of the darkness. Violante cast him an uneasy glance, and resisted when the soldier dragged her away with him – but Mortimer still remained silent.

'Your Grace!' Orpheus took a respectful step forward (at least, he hoped it looked respectful). 'Let *me* get him to consent!'

A whispered name (for you just have to call the creatures by their right names, like dogs), and the Night-Mare emerged from Orpheus's shadow.

'Not the Night-Mare!' the Piper said forcefully. 'You want to see the Bluejay dead on the spot, like the Fire-Dancer? No.' He had Mortimer hauled to his feet again.

'Didn't you hear? I'm dealing with this, Piper.' Thumbling took off his black gloves.

Orpheus tasted disappointment like bitter almonds on his tongue. What a chance to show the Adderhead how useful he was! If he'd only had Fenoglio's book so that he could use it to write the Piper right out of this world. And that Thumbling fellow too.

‘My lord! Please, listen to me!’ He stepped in front of the Adderhead. ‘May I ask for the answer to an additional question to be extracted from the prisoner in the course of what, I’m sure, he will find a rather uncomfortable process? You’ll remember the book I told you about, the book that can change this world in any way you like! Please get him to say where it is!’

But the Adderhead just turned his back. ‘Later,’ he said, and dropped back, with another groan, into the chair where the shadows hid him. ‘We’re talking about only one book now, a book with white pages. You can start, Thumbling,’ said his gasping voice in the darkness. ‘But take care of his hands.’

When Orpheus felt the sudden chill on his face, he thought at first that the night wind was blowing through the black-draped windows. But there they were, standing beside the Bluejay, as white and terrible as they had been in the graveyard of the strolling players. They surrounded Mortimer like flightless angels, their limbs made of mist, their faces white as bleached bone. The Piper stumbled back so hastily that he fell and cut himself on his own knife. Even Thumbling’s face lost its look of indifference. And the soldiers who had been guarding Mortimer flinched back like frightened children.

It couldn’t be true! Why were they protecting him? As thanks to him for tricking them more than once? For stealing Dustfinger away from them? Orpheus felt the Night-Mare cower like a beaten dog. So even the Night-Mare feared them? No. No, for heaven’s sake! This world really must be rewritten. And he was the man to do it. Yes, indeed. He’d find a way.

What were they whispering?

The pale light spread by the daughters of Death drove away the shadows where the Adderhead was concealed, and Orpheus saw the Silver Prince fighting for breath in his dark corner, putting his shaking hands over his eyes. So he was still afraid of the White Women, even though he had killed so many men in

the Castle of Night to prove that he wasn't. All lies. The Adderhead, in his immortal body, was breathless with fear.

But Mortimer stood among Fenoglio's angels of death as if they were a part of him – and smiled.

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Mother and Son

The scent of moist dirt and fresh growth washes in over me, watery, slippery, with an acid taste to it like the bark of a tree. It smells like youth; it smells like heartbreak.

Margaret Atwood,
The Blind Assassin

Of course the Adderhead had Violante locked in her mother's former chamber. He knew very well that she would just hear the many lies his late wife had told her all the more clearly there. It couldn't be true. Her mother had never lied to her. Mother and father had always meant good and bad, truth and lies, love and hate. It had been so simple! But now her father had taken that from her too. Violante searched inside herself for her pride and the strength she had always preserved,

but all she found was an ugly little girl sitting in the dust of her hopes, at the heart of her mother's shattered image.

She leant her forehead against the barred door and listened for the Bluejay's screams, but she heard only the guards talking outside her door. Oh, why hadn't he said yes? Because he thought she'd still be able to shield him? Thumbling would soon teach him better. She couldn't help thinking of the minstrel whom her father had had quartered because he had sung for her mother, and the servant who had brought her books and was starved to death in a cage outside her window. She had given him parchment to eat. How could she have promised the Bluejay protection when those who were on her side had always gone to their deaths?

'Thumbling will slice strips off his skin!' Jacopo's voice hardly reached her. 'They say he does it so skilfully that his victims don't die. He's said to have practised on dead bodies!'

'Be quiet!' She felt like slapping his pale face. He was growing more and more like Cosimo every day, although he would so much rather have been like his grandfather.

'You can't hear anything from here. They'll take him down to the cellar near the dungeons. I've been there. All the instruments are still in place – rusty, but they're still fit for use: chains, knives, screws, iron spikes ...'

Violante looked at him, and he fell silent. She went to the window, but the cage where they had first imprisoned the Bluejay was empty. Only the Fire-Dancer lay dead outside it. Strange that the ravens hadn't touched him. As if they were afraid to.

Jacopo took the plate of food that one of the maids had brought him and sulkily picked at it. How old was he now? She couldn't remember. At least he'd stopped wearing that tin nose since the Piper had made fun of him for it.

'You like him.'

'Who?'

‘The Bluejay.’

‘He’s better than any of them.’ Once again she listened at the door. Why hadn’t he said yes? Then perhaps she might yet have been able to save him.

‘If the Bluejay makes another book, will Grandfather still go on smelling so bad? I think he will. I think he’ll just fall down dead some day. He looks dead already, really.’ How indifferent he sounded. A few months ago Jacopo had still adored her father. Were all children like that? How would she know? She had just one child. Children ... Violante still saw them running out of the castle gate in Ombra and into their mothers’ arms. If the Bluejay died for them, were they really worth it?

‘I don’t like looking at Grandfather any more!’ Jacopo shuddered and put his hands over his eyes. ‘If he dies I’ll be king, won’t I?’ The chill in his clear voice both impressed and alarmed Violante.

‘No, you won’t. Not after your father attacked him. His own son will be king. King in the Castle of Night *and* in Ombra.’

‘But he’s only a baby.’

‘So his mother will reign for him. And the Milksop.’ What’s more, Violante added in her thoughts, your grandfather is still immortal, and no one seems able to do anything about it. Not for all eternity.

Jacopo pushed his plate aside and strolled over to Brianna. She was embroidering a picture of a horseman who looked suspiciously like Cosimo, although Brianna said he was the hero of an old fairy tale. It did Violante good to have Brianna with her again, although the girl had been even more silent than usual since the Night-Mare had killed her father. Perhaps she had loved him after all. Most daughters loved their fathers.

‘Brianna!’ Jacopo thrust a hand into her beautiful hair. ‘Read to me. Go on. I’m bored.’

‘You can read for yourself. In fact you can read very well.’ Brianna removed his fingers from her hair and went on with her embroidery.

‘I’ll fetch the Night-Mare!’ Jacopo’s voice rose shrilly, as it always did when he didn’t get his own way. ‘I’ll fetch it to eat you like your father. Oh no, I forgot, it didn’t eat him. He’s lying dead out in the courtyard, with ravens pecking around him.’

Brianna didn’t even raise her head, but Violante saw her hands trembling so violently that she pricked her finger.

‘Jacopo!’

Her son turned to her, and for a moment Violante thought his eyes were begging her to say more. Shake me! Hit me! Punish me! said those eyes. Or take me in your arms. I’m scared. I hate this castle. I want to go away.

She hadn’t wanted children. She didn’t know how to deal with them. But Cosimo’s father had begged for a grandson. How was she supposed to deal with a child? She could hardly manage to keep her own painful heart together. If only it had at least been a girl. The Bluejay had a daughter. Everyone said he loved her very much. Perhaps he’d give in after all for the daughter’s sake, and bind her father a second book. If the Milksop really did catch the girl. And then? She didn’t want to think about his wife. Perhaps she was dying anyway. The Milksop liked treating those he hunted cruelly.

‘Read! Read to me!’ Jacopo was still standing in front of Brianna. He snatched the embroidery from her lap, so roughly that she pricked her hand again.

‘That looks like my father.’

‘No, it doesn’t!’ Brianna cast a quick glance at Violante.

‘Yes, it does. Why don’t you ask the Bluejay to bring him back from the dead? The way he brought *your* father back?’

Once Brianna would have slapped him, but Cosimo's death had broken something in her. She was soft now, like the inside of a shellfish, soft and full of pain. All the same, her company was better than none, and Violante slept much more easily when Brianna sang for her in the evenings.

Outside, someone pushed back the bolt.

What did that mean? Were they coming to tell her that the Piper had killed the Bluejay after all? That Thumbling had broken him like so many men before? And if so, she asked herself, what difference does it make? Your heart is broken into pieces anyway.

But it was Four-Eyes who came in. Orpheus, or Moonface, as the Piper derisively called him. Violante still couldn't understand how he had insinuated himself into her father's good graces so swiftly. Perhaps it was his voice. It was almost as beautiful as the Bluejay's, but something in it made Violante shudder.

'Your Highness!' Her visitor bowed so low that the bow verged on mockery.

'Has the Bluejay given my father the right answer after all?'

'No, I'm afraid not. But he is still alive, if that's what you wanted to know.' His eyes looked so innocent through those round glasses – glasses that she had copied from him, except that unlike Four-Eyes Violante didn't always wear hers. Sometimes she preferred to see the world through a blur.

'Where is he?'

'Ah, so you've seen the empty cage. Well, I suggested to the Adderhead different accommodation for the Bluejay. You presumably know about the dungeons where your grandfather used to throw his prisoners. Once in there, I'm sure our noble robber will very soon give up the idea of resisting your father's wishes. But let's come to the reason for my visit.'

His smile was sweet as syrup. What did he want from her?

‘Your Highness.’ His voice stroked Violante’s skin like the hare’s foot that Balbulus used to smooth parchment. ‘Like you, I am a great lover of books. Sad to say, I hear that the library of this castle is in a terrible condition, but it has also come to my ears that you still have a few books with you. Would it be possible for me to borrow one, or maybe even two? Of course I would show my appreciation of the loan in every possible way.’

‘What about *my* book?’ Jacopo pushed in front of Violante, his arms folded in the pose his grandfather used to adopt before his swollen arms had made even that gesture painful. ‘You haven’t given it back to me yet. You owe me –’ he counted on his short fingers – ‘you owe me twelve silver coins.’

The look Orpheus gave Jacopo was neither warm nor sweet, but his voice was still both. ‘Why, of course! What a good thing you’ve reminded me of it, Prince. Come to my room and I’ll give you the coins and your book back. But now let me speak to your mother, will you?’ With an apologetic smile, he turned back to Violante.

‘Well, what do you say?’ he asked, lowering his voice to a confidential tone. ‘Would you lend me one, Your Highness? I’ve heard wonderful things about your books, and believe me, I will treat them with the utmost care.’

‘She only has two with her.’ Jacopo pointed to the chest beside the bed. ‘And they’re both about the Blue—’

Violante clapped her hand over his mouth, but Orpheus was already making for the chest.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, barring his way. ‘I am too much attached to these books to let them out of my hands. And as I’m sure you have heard, my father has seen to it that Balbulus can’t illuminate any more books for me.’

Orpheus hardly seemed to be listening. He was staring spellbound at the chest. ‘May I at least take a look at them?’

‘Don’t let him have them!’

Clearly Orpheus hadn't even noticed Brianna. His face froze when he heard her voice behind him, and his plump fingers clenched into fists.

Brianna stood up and returned his hostile glance with composure. 'He does strange things with books,' she said. 'Books and the words in them. And he hates the Bluejay. My father said he tried selling him to Death.'

'Poor confused creature!' stammered Orpheus, but he was visibly nervous as he adjusted his glasses. 'She was my maid, as presumably you know, and I caught her stealing. No doubt that's why she says such things about me.'

Brianna went as red as if he had thrown hot water in her face, but Violante moved to her side to defend her. 'Brianna would never steal,' she said. 'Now go away, please. I can't give you the books.'

'Oh, so she'd never steal?' Orpheus was clearly having some difficulty in giving his voice its old velvety sound. 'As far as I know she stole your husband from you, didn't she?'

'Here you are!'

Before Violante could react Jacopo was standing in front of Orpheus, holding her books. 'Which one do you want? She likes reading the thicker book most. But this time you must pay me more than you paid for my own book!'

Violante tried to snatch the books from his hands, but Jacopo was surprisingly strong, and Orpheus hastily opened the door.

'Quick. Take these books to safe keeping!' he ordered the soldier on guard outside.

The man had no difficulty in getting the books away from Jacopo. Orpheus opened them, read a few lines first from one, then from the other – and gave Violante a triumphant smile.

'Yes, exactly the reading matter I need,' he said. 'You'll get them back as soon as they've served their purpose. But these books,' he added to Jacopo, pinching his cheek roughly, 'I'm

borrowing for free, you greedy son of a dead prince! And we can forget about any payment for your other book too, or do you want to meet my Night-Mare? I'm sure you've heard of it.'

Jacopo just stared at him with a mixture of fear and hatred on his thin face.

Orpheus, however, bowed and went out through the doorway. 'I really can't thank you enough, Your Highness,' he said by way of farewell. 'You have no idea how happy these books make me. Now the Bluejay is certain to give your father the right answer soon.'

Jacopo was chewing his lip hard as the guard outside shot the bolt again. He always did that when something hadn't gone the way he wanted. Violante slapped his face so hard that he stumbled against her bed and fell. He began crying without a sound, his eyes fixed on her like a dog that has been punished.

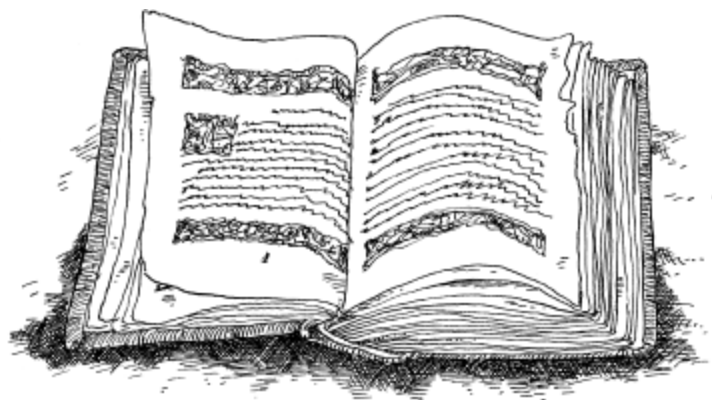
Brianna helped him up and wiped his tears away with her dress.

'What is Four-Eyes going to do with the books?' Violante was shivering. She was shivering all over. She had a new enemy.

'I don't know,' Brianna replied. 'All I do know is that my father took one away from him because he had done great harm with it.'

Great harm.

Now the Bluejay is certain to give your father the right answer soon.



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Clothed and Unclothed

Archimedes finished his sparrow, wiped his beak politely on the bough, and turned his eyes full on the Wart. These great, round eyes had, as a famous writer has expressed it, a bloom of light upon them like the purple bloom of powder on a grape.

‘Now that you have learned to fly,’ he said, ‘Merlyn wants you to try the Wild Geese.’

T.H. White,
The Once and Future King

It was easy to fly, so easy. The skill of it came with the body, with every feather and every delicate bone. For the seeds had turned Resa into a bird. The transformation caused painful spasms which had terrified Lazaro the Strong Man, but she hadn’t turned into a magpie like Mortola. ‘A swift!’ the Strong

Man had whispered when she flew to his hand, dizzy to find everything suddenly so much larger.

‘Swifts are nice birds, very nice. It suits you.’ He had very gently stroked her wings with his forefinger, and it seemed so strange that she couldn’t smile at him with her beak. But she could speak in her human voice, which alarmed poor Tullio even more.

Her feathers warmed her, and the guards on the banks of the lake didn’t even look up as she flew over their heads. Obviously they hadn’t yet found the soldiers the Strong Man had killed. The crests on their grey cloaks reminded Resa of the dungeons of the Castle of Night. Forget them, she thought, as she spread her wings on the wind. That’s in the past. But perhaps you can still change what’s yet to come. Or was life after all only a tangle of threads spun by fate, and there was no escaping it? Don’t think, Resa, she told herself, fly!

Where was he? Where was Mo?

The Piper has locked him up in a cage. Tullio hadn’t been able to say just where that cage stood. In a courtyard, he had stammered, a courtyard full of painted birds. Resa had heard about the painted walls of the castle. From the outside, however, its walls were almost black, built of the dark stone also found on the banks of the lake. She was glad she didn’t have to cross the bridge, which was swarming with soldiers. It was raining, and the raindrops made endless circles on the water below her. But her body weighed very little, and flying was a wonderful sensation. She saw her reflection underneath her. It shot across the waves like an arrow, and at last the towers rose to meet her, the fortified walls, the slate-grey roofs, and among them courtyards – gaping dark holes in the pattern of the stone. She spotted trees with bare branches, dog-runs, a frozen garden, and soldiers everywhere. But cages ...?

When she finally found them at first she saw only Dustfinger, lying where he had been thrown on the grey paving stones like

a bundle of old clothes. Oh, God. She would never have wanted to see him like that again. There was a child standing beside him, staring at the still body as if waiting for it to move – just as it had done once before, if the songs of the strolling players told the truth. And they do tell the truth, Resa wanted to call down. I've felt his warm hands. I've seen him smile again and kiss his wife. But when she saw him lying there it was as if he had never moved since he died in the mine.

She didn't see the cages until she dived below the slate roof tops. They were all empty. No trace of Mo. Empty cages and an empty body. She wanted to let herself drop like a stone, hit the paving and lie there as motionless as Dustfinger.

The child turned. He was the boy she had last seen standing on the battlements in Ombra. Violante's son. Even Meggie, who would usually take any child on her lap with such tenderness, spoke of him only with dislike. Jacopo. For a moment he stared up at Resa as if he could see the woman under the feathers, but then he bent over the dead man again, touched the rigid face – and straightened up when someone called his name. There was no mistaking that strained nasal voice.

The Piper.

Resa flew up to the ridge of a roof.

'Come along, your grandfather wants to see you!' The Piper took the boy by the scruff of his neck and pushed him roughly towards the nearest flight of steps.

'What for?' Jacopo's voice sounded like a ridiculous echo of his grandfather's, but it was also the voice of a little boy lost among all the grown-ups, fatherless – and motherless, judging by all Roxane had said about Violante's lack of love for him.

'What do you think he wants you for? He's certainly not pining away for your peevish company.' The Piper thumped Jacopo on the back with his fist. 'He wants to know what your mother says when you're alone in her room with her.'

'She doesn't talk to me.'

‘Oh, I don’t like to hear that. What are we to do with you if you’re no use as a spy? Maybe we ought to feed you to the Night-Mare! It’s a long time since the creature had anything to eat, and if your grandfather gets his way it won’t get to taste the Bluejay in a hurry either.’

Night-Mare.

So Tullio had told the truth. As soon as the voices died away Resa fluttered down to Dustfinger. But the swift couldn’t weep any more than she could smile. Fly after the Piper, Resa, she told herself as she perched on the stones, wet with rain. Look for Mo. There’s no more you can do for the Fire-Dancer now, any more than you could before. She was only thankful that the Night-Mare hadn’t feasted on him as it had on Snapper. His cheek was so cold when she pressed her feathered head against it.

‘How did you come by that pretty dress of feathers, Resa?’

The whisper came from nowhere – out of the rain, the moist air, the painted stone – but surely not from the cold lips. Yet it was Dustfinger’s voice, husky and soft at the same time, ever familiar. Resa swiftly turned her bird’s head – and heard his quiet laughter.

‘Didn’t you look round like that for me before, back in the dungeons of the Castle of Night? I was invisible then too, as far as I remember, but it’s far more entertaining to be without a body. Although you can’t enjoy the entertainment too long. I’m afraid if I let my body lie here much longer it won’t fit me any more, and then I suppose not even your husband’s voice could bring me back. Apart from the fact that without the help of the flesh you soon forget who you are. I admit I’d almost forgotten already – until I saw you.’

It was like seeing a sleeper wake when the dead man moved. Dustfinger pushed back the damp hair from his face and looked down at himself, as if to make sure that his body did still fit him. It was just as Resa had dreamt it the night after his first

death, when he did not wake again. Not until Mo brought him back to life.

Mo. She fluttered up on to Dustfinger's arm, but he put a warning finger to his lips as she opened her beak. He called Gwin with a soft whistle, then looked up at the steps which the Piper had climbed with Jacopo, to the windows on their left and on again to the oriel tower casting its shadow down on them. 'The fairies tell tales of a plant that turns human beings into animals and animals into humans,' he whispered. 'But they also say it's dangerous to use it. How long have you been wearing your feathered clothing?'

'About two hours.'

'Then it's time to take it off again. Luckily this castle has many forgotten chambers, and I explored them all before the Piper arrived.' He put out his hand, and Resa perched on his skin, now warm again. He was alive! Wasn't he?

'I brought back a few very useful abilities from the realm of Death!' whispered Dustfinger as he carried her down a passage painted with fish and water-nymphs so true to life that Resa felt as if the lake had swallowed them up. 'I can take off this body like a garment, I can give fire a soul, and I can read your husband's heart better than the letters you took such trouble to teach me.'

He pushed a door open. No window let any light into the room beyond, but Dustfinger whispered, and the walls were covered with sparks as if they were growing a fiery coat.

When Resa spat out the seeds she had been holding under her tongue, two were missing, and for a terrible moment she was afraid she would be a bird for ever, but her body still remembered itself. When she had human limbs again she instinctively stroked her belly and wondered whether the child inside it was changed by the seeds too. The idea frightened her so much that she was almost sick.

Dustfinger picked up a swift's feather lying at her feet and looked at it thoughtfully.

'Roxane is well,' said Resa.

He smiled. 'I know.'

He seemed to know everything. So she told him nothing about either Snapper or Mortola, or how the Black Prince had nearly died. And Dustfinger did not ask why she had followed Mo.

'What about the Night-Mare?' Even speaking the word frightened her.

'I slipped through its black paws just in time.' He rubbed a hand over his face as if to wipe a shadow away. 'Luckily creatures of its kind aren't interested in dead men.'

'Where did it come from?'

'Orpheus brought it here with him. It follows him like a dog.'

'Orpheus?' But that was impossible! Orpheus was in Ombra, drowning his sorrows in drink and wallowing in self-pity, as he had been doing ever since Dustfinger stole the book from him.

'That's right, Orpheus. I don't know how he fixed it, but he serves the Adder now. And he's just had your husband thrown into one of the dungeons under the castle.'

Footsteps could be heard above them, but they soon died away.

'Take me to him!'

'You can't go there. The cells are deep down and well guarded. I may be able to do it alone, but two of us would attract far too much attention. This castle will be teeming with soldiers once they discover that the Fire-Dancer is back from the dead again.'

You can't go there ... wait here, Resa ... it's too dangerous. She was tired of hearing this kind of thing. 'How is he?' she asked. 'You said you can read his heart.'

She saw the answer in Dustfinger's eyes.

'A bird will attract less attention than you would,' she said, and put the seeds in her mouth before he could stop her.



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Black

You are the bird whose soft wings came
When I cried out at night, waking from sleep.
Cried only with my arms, because your name
Is like a chasm, a thousand long nights deep.

Rainer Maria Rilke,
The Guardian Angel

The cell they threw Mo into was worse than the tower in the Castle of Night or the dungeon in Ombra. They had let him down on a chain, his hands bound, deeper and deeper down until the dark settled on his eyes like blindness. And the Piper had stood there above him, describing in his nasal whine how he was going to bring Meggie and Resa here and kill them before his eyes. As if the Piper's words made any difference. Meggie was lost already. Death would take her as well as him.

But perhaps the Great Shape-Changer would at least spare Resa and their unborn child if Mo refused to bind the Adderhead another book. Ink, Mortimer, black ink surrounds you, he thought. It was difficult to breathe in this damp void. But it made him feel strangely calm to think it was no longer up to him to go on with this story, on and on all the time. He was so tired of it ...

He dropped to his knees. The damp stone felt like the bottom of a well. As a child he had always been afraid of falling into a well and starving to death, helpless and alone. He shuddered, longing for Dustfinger's fire, for its light and warmth. But Dustfinger was dead. Extinguished by Orpheus's Night-Mare. Mo thought he could hear it breathing beside him, so distinctly that he looked for its red eyes in all that blackness. But there was nothing. Or was there?

He heard footsteps, and looked up.

'Well, how do you like it down there?'

Orpheus was standing on the edge of the shaft. The light of his torch didn't reach the bottom of it; the cell lay too deep for that, and Mo instinctively stepped back so that the darkness would hide him. Like a caged animal, he thought.

'Oh, so you're not talking to me any more? Very understandable.' Orpheus smiled with self-satisfaction, and Mo's hand went to where his knife had been hidden, the knife so carefully concealed by Battista. Thumbling had found it all the same. Mo imagined thrusting it into Orpheus's flabby body. Again and again. The pictures that his helpless hatred conjured up were so full of blood that they sickened him.

'I'm here to tell you how this story goes on. Just in case you still think you play a leading part in it.'

Mo closed his eyes and leant back against the damp wall. Let him talk, he told himself. Think of Resa, think of Meggie. Or perhaps he'd better not. How had Orpheus heard about the cave?

All is lost, a voice inside him whispered. Everything. The composure that he had felt since the appearance of the White Women was gone. Come back, he wanted to whisper. Please! Protect me! But they didn't come. Instead, words ate into his heart like pale maggots. Where did they come from? All is lost. Stop it, he told himself. But the words ate their way on, and he writhed as if in physical pain.

'You're so quiet! Ah, do you feel it already?' Orpheus laughed, happy as a child. 'I knew it would work. I knew it when I read the first song. Oh yes, I have a book again, Mortimer. In fact I have three of them, full to the brim with Fenoglio's words, and two of them are all about the Bluejay. Violante brought them to this castle. Wasn't that kind of her? I had to make some changes, of course – move a few words here, a few more there. Fenoglio is very kind to the Bluejay, but I was able to put that right.'

Fenoglio's Bluejay songs. All neatly written down by Balbulus. Mo closed his eyes.

'And, by the way, the water isn't my doing!' Orpheus called down to him. 'The Adderhead has had the sluices to the lake opened. You won't drown, it doesn't rise high enough for that, but it won't be pleasant.'

At the same moment Mo felt the water rising up his legs as if the darkness had turned liquid, so cold and black that he fought for breath.

'No, the water isn't my idea,' Orpheus went on, sounding bored. 'I know you too well by now to think that fear of that kind would change your mind. Presumably you're hoping your obstinacy may yet mollify Death, now that you haven't kept your part of the bargain. Oh yes, I know about the deal you did with Death, I know everything ... but however that may be, I'll drive the obstinacy out of you. I'll make you forget your high-minded virtues. I'll make you forget everything except the fear, because the White Women can't protect you from my words.'

Mo wanted to strike the man dead. With his bare hands. But they were bound, he reminded himself

‘At first I was going to write something about your wife and daughter, but then I said to myself: no, Orpheus, that way he won’t feel the words himself!’ How the moon-faced creature was enjoying every syllable he spoke. As if he had dreamt of this moment. There he is up above, thought Mo, and here I am down in a black cell, helpless as a rat that he could kill at any moment.

‘No,’ Orpheus went on. ‘No, I said to myself. Let him feel the power of your words for himself. Show him that from now on you can play with the Bluejay like a cat playing with a mouse. Except that your claws are made of letters!’

And Mo felt the claws. It was as if the water were seeping through his skin and straight into his heart. So black. Then came the pain. As violent as if Mortola had shot him a second time, and so real that he pressed his hands to his chest, thinking he would feel his own blood between his fingers. Although the darkness blinded him, he saw it stain his shirt and his hands, and felt his strength fading away as it had before. He could hardly stand upright; he had to brace his back against the wall to keep from slipping into the water that was already up to his waist. Resa. Oh God. Resa, help me.

Despair shook him like a child. Despair and helpless rage.

‘I wasn’t sure at first what would work best.’ Orpheus’s voice cut through the pain like a blunt knife. ‘Should I send a few unpleasant water-monsters to visit you? I have the book here that Fenoglio wrote for Jacopo. It has some rather nasty creatures in it. But I decided on another, far more interesting way! I decided to drive you mad with beings out of your own head, come to haunt you with old fears, old anger and old pain all dammed up in your heroic heart, locked away but not forgotten. Bring it all back to him, Orpheus! I told myself. With some added images that he’s always been afraid of: a dead wife.

A dead child. Send them all down to him in the darkness, let him drown in his own anger. Who feels like a hero when he's trembling with fright and knows it comes from nowhere but himself? How does the Bluejay feel when he dreams of bloody slaughter? How does it feel to doubt your own sanity? Yes, I told myself, if you want to break him, that's the way. Let him lose himself, let the Bluejay howl like a mad dog, let him trap himself in his own fear. Let loose the Furies who can kill him so cleverly from the inside.'

Mo felt what Orpheus was describing even as the other man spoke, and he realized that Orpheus had already read the words aloud some time ago, with a tongue as powerful as his own. Yes, it was a new Bluejay song. Telling how he lost his mind in a damp, black cell, how he nearly drowned himself in his despair, and how at last he begged for mercy and bound the Adderhead another White Book, his hands still shaking from hours in the dark.

The water had stopped rising, but Mo felt something brush past his legs. Breathe slowly, Mortimer, breathe very steadily. Shut out the words, don't let them in. You can do it. But how, when a gunshot had just entered his breast again, when his blood was mingling with the water and everything in him cried out for revenge? He felt feverish again, feverish and yet so cold. He bit his lip to keep Orpheus from hearing him groan, pressed his hand to his heart. Feel it; there isn't really any blood there. Meggie isn't dead, even if you see that image as clearly as Orpheus could write the scene. No, no, no! But the words whispered: yes! And he felt as if he were breaking into a thousand tiny shards.

'Throw your torch down, guard! I want to see him.'

The torch fell. It dazzled Mo, and drifted on the dark water for a moment before going out.

'Well, well, so you do feel them! You feel every single word, don't you?' Orpheus looked down at him like a child looks at a

worm he has put on a hook, fascinated to see it writhe. Mo wanted to put his head under the water until he couldn't breathe any more. Stop it, Mortimer, he told himself, what is he doing to you? Defend yourself. But how? He felt like sinking into the water just to escape the words, but he knew that even there they would be waiting for him.

'I'll be back in an hour's time!' Orpheus called down. 'Of course, I couldn't resist reading at least a few nasty creatures into the water for you, but don't worry, they won't kill you. Who knows, perhaps you'll even find them a welcome diversion from what your mind shows you? Bluejay ... yes, you really ought to be careful when you choose what part to play. Get them to call me as soon as you realize that your high-minded approach is out of place here. Then I'll write you a few words to save you. Along the lines of: *but morning came, and the Bluejay's madness left him ...*'

Orpheus laughed, and went away. Leaving him alone with the water and the darkness and the words.

Bind the Book for the Adderhead. The sentence formed in Mo's mind as if written in perfect calligraphy. Bind him another White Book and all will be well.

Again pain shot through him so violently that he cried out. He saw Thumbling taking his fingers in a pair of pincers, saw the Milksop dragging Meggie out of a cave by her hair, saw the dogs snapping at Resa. He was shivering with fever, or was it from the cold? It's only in your mind, Mortimer! He struck his forehead against the stone. If only he could have seen something, anything but Orpheus's images. If only he could have felt something other than the words. Press your hands on the stone, go on, dip your face in the water, strike yourself with your fists, that's all that's real, nothing else. Oh yes?

Mo sobbed, and pressed his bound hands to his forehead. He heard a fluttering above him. Sparks sprang up in the blackness. The dark retreated as if someone were removing a blindfold

from his eyes. Dustfinger? No, Dustfinger was dead. Even if his heart refused to believe it.

The Bluejay is dying, the voice inside him whispered, the Bluejay is losing his mind. And he heard fluttering again. Of course. Death was coming to visit him, and she wasn't sending the White Women to protect him again. This time she was coming herself to take him away, because he had failed. Death would take first him, then Meggie ... but perhaps even that was better than the words Orpheus had written.

It was all black, so black, in spite of the sparks. He could still see them. Where did they come from? He heard the fluttering again, and suddenly he felt someone beside him. A hand was laid on his forehead, caressed his face. Such a familiar hand.

'What is it? Mo!'

Resa. This was impossible. Was Orpheus conjuring up her face, only to drown her the next moment before his eyes? He had never known that Orpheus could write so well. And how warm her hands were!

'What's the matter with him?'

Dustfinger's voice. Mo looked up and saw him, exactly where Orpheus had been standing. Madness. He was caught in a dream until Orpheus released him.

'Mo!' Resa took his face between her hands. Only a dream. But what did that matter? It was so good to see her. He sobbed with relief, and she held him tight. 'You must get away from here!'

She couldn't be real.

'Listen to me, Mo! You must get away.'

'You can't be here.' How heavy his tongue was.

'Yes, I can.'

'Dustfinger is dead.' Resa ... she looked so different with her hair pinned up.

Something swam between them. Spikes stuck up from the water, and Resa flinched in alarm. Mo drew her close and hit out at the swimming thing. Still as if in a dream. Dustfinger threw a rope down. It didn't come low enough, but at a whisper from above it began growing longer, lengthened by fibres made of flames.

Mo reached for it, and let it go again.

'I can't leave this place.' The sparks made the water filling the cell seem as red as blood. 'I can't.'

'What are you talking about?' Resa pressed the fiery rope into his damp hands.

'Death. Meggie.' He had lost the words, too, in all the darkness. 'I have to find the Book, Resa.'

She put the rope back into his hands once more. They would have to climb fast to keep it from burning their skin. Mo began climbing, but it seemed as though the darkness clung to him like a black scarf. Dustfinger helped him up over the rim of the shaft. Two guards lay there, dead or unconscious.

Dustfinger looked at him, looked into his heart, saw everything in it.

'Those are terrible pictures,' he said.

'Black as ink.' Mo's voice was hoarse. 'A greeting from Orpheus.'

The words were still there. Pain. Despair. Hatred. Rage. His heart seemed to fill with them at every breath he took. As if the dark dungeon were inside him now.

He took a sword from one of the guards and drew Resa close. He felt her trembling under the men's clothes she wore. Perhaps she really was here. But how? And why wasn't the Fire-Dancer lying dead outside the cages any more? Suppose these are only pictures conjured up by Orpheus, he thought as he followed Dustfinger. Suppose he's showing them to me only to fling me even deeper into the darkness? Orpheus. Strike him dead,

Mortimer, him and his words. His own hatred frightened him almost more than the darkness; it was so full of blood, so intemperate.

Dustfinger went ahead as fast as if he were leading them along paths he knew. Flights of steps, gateways, endless passages, with never any hesitation, as if the stones themselves told him the way. Wherever he went, sparks sprang from the walls, spreading out and painting the black with gold. They met soldiers three times. Mo killed them with as much relish as if he were killing Orpheus. Dustfinger had to make him go on, and Mo saw the fear on Resa's face. He reached for her hand, like a drowning man – and felt the darkness still inside him.

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Ah, Fenoglio

And so the poet's testament ends here,
And as he leaves this world upon his bier,
Take you your leave of him, saying thank God
We're rid of him, let's have the next man now,
To make a fair round dozen beneath the sod
Just as the good old custom used to vow.
In life and death alike, let's not pretend
Anyone mourns for such a vagrant's end.

Adapted from François Villon,
A Ballade with which Villon Concludes his Testament

In the hand of a giant. His own giant! Not bad, eh? No reason to be sad about it. If only the Black Prince had looked rather livelier! If, if, if, Fenoglio, he told himself. If only you'd

finished writing the words for Mortimer! If only you had some idea how this story is to go on now ...

The huge fingers held him both firmly and carefully, as if they were used to carrying small humans around. Not necessarily a reassuring idea. Fenoglio really didn't want to become some giant child's toy. He had little doubt that it would be one of the nastiest ways of meeting one's end. But would anyone ask his opinion? No.

Which brings us back to the one crucial question, thought Fenoglio as his stomach, bumped about as it was, slowly but surely began to feel as if he'd eaten too many of Minerva's stuffed pigs' trotters. The one great crucial question.

Was there another man writing this story?

Was there a scribbler sitting somewhere in the hills that he himself had described so vividly, another writer who had sent him falling into this giant's hand? Or was the wretch sitting in the other world, the real world that hadn't been written, the way he used to sit there himself, putting *Inkheart* down on paper?

Oh, come on! What would that make you, Fenoglio? he asked himself, both annoyed and badly shaken, as he always was when that question occurred to him. No, he wasn't dangling from strings like the stupid puppet that Battista sometimes showed in marketplaces (although it did look a little like him). No, no, no. No strings for Fenoglio, no strings controlling either his words or his fate. He liked to keep his life in his own hands and didn't want any interference – although he admitted that he himself was very fond of pulling strings. But there it was: his story had simply swerved off course. No one was writing it. It was writing itself! And now it had come up with this stupid idea of the giant carrying him off!

Although his stomach rebelled, Fenoglio cast another glance at the depths below him. It was definitely a long way down, but why should that bother him after he'd fallen from the tree like a

ripe fruit? The sight of the Black Prince gave considerably more cause for concern. He really did look alarmingly lifeless lying in the giant's other hand. What a shame. All the trouble he'd gone to to keep the man alive – all the words, the herbs in the snow, Roxane's nursing, all for nothing! Damn it! Fenoglio swore so loudly that the giant raised him to his eyes to look at him. This was too much!

Would it help to smile? Was it any use talking to him? Well, if you don't know the answer, Fenoglio, you old fool, he told himself, then who does?

The giant stopped. He was still staring at him. He had opened his fingers out slightly, and Fenoglio took the opportunity of stretching his old limbs.

Words, words were wanted again – and of course, as always, they had to be exactly right. Perhaps it was a blessing to be mute and unable to rely on words at all!

'Er ...' What a wretched start, Fenoglio! 'Er. What's your name?' Oh, for heaven's sake!

The giant puffed air into his face and said something. The sounds that passed his lips were certainly words, but Fenoglio didn't understand them. How could that be possible?

Good heavens, how the giant was looking at him! Fenoglio's eldest grandson had looked like that when he found a big black beetle in his kitchen. The boy was both fascinated and troubled by it. And then the beetle began wriggling, and Pippo had dropped it in alarm and trodden on it. So keep still, Fenoglio! No wriggling, not the least little wriggle, however much your old bones ache. Good God, those fingers. Each of them as long as one of his own arms!

But clearly the giant had lost interest in him for the moment. He was examining his other catch with obvious concern. Finally he shook the Black Prince as if he were a watch that had run down, and sighed when he still didn't move. With another deep sigh he sank to his knees – astonishingly gently, given his size –

looked sadly at the black face, and then carefully laid the Prince on the thick moss under the trees. It was just what Fenoglio's grandchildren had done with the dead birds they took away from their cat. They'd had exactly the same look on their faces as they laid the small bodies to rest among his roses. Pippo used to make a cross out of twigs for every dead animal, but the giant didn't do that for the Black Prince. He didn't bury him either. He just covered him with dry leaves, very carefully, as if he didn't want to disturb his sleep. Then he rose to his feet again, looked at Fenoglio – perhaps to make sure that he, at least, was still breathing – and went on, every stride as long as a dozen human footsteps, perhaps more. Going where? Away from everything, Fenoglio, far away!

He felt those mighty fingers closing more tightly around him again, and then – he couldn't believe his ears! – the giant began humming the same tune that Roxane sang to the children in the evening. Did giants sing human songs? Whether they did or not, this one was obviously happy with himself and the world, even if the toy with the black face was broken. Perhaps he was thinking about giving the other strange creature that had fallen into his hand so suddenly to his son. Oh no! Fenoglio shuddered. Suppose the giant child pulled him apart the way children sometimes dismember insects?

You fool, he thought, you arrogant old fool! Loredan was right. Delusions of grandeur, that's your trouble! How could you think there are words to control a giant?

Another stride, and then another ... goodbye for ever, Ombra. Presumably he'd never find out now what became of the children. And Mortimer.

Fenoglio closed his eyes. And suddenly he thought he heard his grandchildren's high, insistent voices: *Grandfather, play dead for us*. Of course! Nothing easier. How often he'd lain there on his sofa without moving, even when they prodded his stomach and his wrinkled cheeks with their little fingers. *Play dead*.

Fenoglio uttered a loud groan, made his limbs go limp and fixed his eyes.

There. The giant stopped and looked at him in dismay. Keep your breathing shallow, Fenoglio told himself. It would be better not to breathe at all, but then your stupid old head would probably burst.

When the giant puffed into his face once again he almost sneezed. But Fenoglio's grandchildren had puffed in his face too, although with considerably smaller mouths, and breath that didn't smell quite so strong. Keep still, Fenoglio.

Still.

The mighty face became a mask of disappointment. Another sigh rose from that broad chest. A cautious prod with his forefinger, a few incomprehensible words, and the giant knelt down. The downward plunge made Fenoglio feel dizzy, but he went on playing dead. The giant looked around for help, as if someone might come fluttering down from the trees to revive his toy. A few snowflakes fell from the grey sky – it was getting colder again – and settled on the giant's huge arms. They were as green as the moss all around, as grey as the bark of the trees, and then finally white, as the snow began to fall more thickly.

The giant sighed and murmured to himself. Obviously he really was severely disappointed. Then he put Fenoglio down on the ground as carefully as he had set down the Black Prince, gave him one last experimental prod with his finger – don't move, Fenoglio told himself! – and sprinkled a handful of dry oak leaves on his face. They had woodlice in them, and other creatures of the forest floor, most of which had a great many legs, and all of them immediately looked for new hiding places in Fenoglio's clothes. Keep playing dead, he thought; didn't Pippo once put a caterpillar on your face? And much to his disappointment, you still didn't move!

And he did not move, not even when something very hairy crawled over his nose. He waited for the footsteps to go away

and the ground beneath him to stop vibrating like a drum. Away went the helper he had called. Away he went, leaving Fenoglio alone again with all his other creations. Now what?

All was still. There was only the faintest vibration left in the distance, and Fenoglio pushed the dead leaves off his face and chest and sat up, groaning. His legs felt as if someone had been sitting on them, but they would still carry him. But which way should he go? Follow the giant's footsteps backwards, of course, he thought. After all, they ought to take you straight back to the tree with the nests. You'll be able to read the tracks easily enough for yourself.

There. There was the last footprint. How his ribs hurt! He wondered if one of them was broken. If so, he too would have a claim on Roxane's attentions at last. Not an unpleasant prospect. Although something else awaited him on his return: Signora Loredan's sharp tongue. She'd certainly have something to say about his experiment with the giant. And then there was the Milksop ...

Involuntarily, Fenoglio quickened his pace in spite of his aching ribs. Suppose the Milksop had come back and brought them all down from the tree by now, Loredan and the children, Meggie and Minerva. Roxane and all the others? Oh, why hadn't he simply written that the Milksop and his men were struck down by the plague? That was the trouble with writing: there were such an infinite number of turns the story could take. How were you to know which one was right? Go on, admit it, Fenoglio, he thought, a giant just sounded more magnificent. Quite apart from the fact that the plague would hardly have stayed down at the foot of the tree.

For a moment he stood listening, afraid the monster might come back. Monster, Fenoglio? What did that giant do that was so monstrous? Did he bite off your head or tear a leg off? There you are, then.

Even what happened to the Black Prince had been an accident. Where was the place where the Prince had been left? Everything looked the same under the trees, and the giant's strides were so long that you could lose your way between his footprints.

Fenoglio looked up at the sky. Snowflakes settled on his forehead. Darkness was falling too. That was all he needed! He immediately remembered every creature with which he had populated the night in this world. He wouldn't want to meet a single one of them. There! What was that? Footsteps! He stumbled back against the nearest tree.

'Inkweaver!'

A man was coming towards him. Battista? Fenoglio was so glad to see his pockmarked face! He felt there wasn't a more beautiful face in the whole world.

'You're alive!' cried Battista as he came up. 'We thought the giant had eaten you!'

'The Black Prince ...' Fenoglio was truly surprised to feel such pain in his heart for the Prince.

Battista led him away. 'I know. The bear found him.'

'Is he ...?'

Battista smiled. 'No, he's as alive as you. Although I'm not sure whether all his bones are still unbroken. Seems like Death just doesn't fancy the taste of him! First poison, now a giant – or maybe the White Women simply don't like his face! But we'd better make sure we get back to the nests as soon as we can. I'm afraid the Milksop will come back. He's certainly as terrified of his brother-in-law as he was of the giant!'

The Black Prince was sitting among the roots of the tree where the giant had laid him to rest, his back against the trunk, while the bear tenderly licked his face. The leaves that the giant had so considerately placed over him still clung to his clothes and his hair. He was alive! To his own annoyance, Fenoglio felt

a tear running down his nose. He could have thrown his arms around the Prince's neck.

'Inkweaver! How did you get away?' His voice showed that he was in pain, and Battista gently pushed him back when he tried to sit up straighter.

'Oh, you showed me how, Prince!' said Fenoglio hoarsely. 'The giant was obviously only interested in live toys.'

'Just as well for us,' replied the Prince, closing his eyes. He deserves better, thought Fenoglio. Better than so much pain and all that fighting.

Something rustled in the undergrowth. Fenoglio spun round in alarm, but it was only two more robbers and Farid, with a stretcher made of branches. The boy nodded to him, but he clearly wasn't half as glad as the others to see him safe. How those black eyes were looking at him! The fact was, Farid knew too much about Fenoglio and the part he played in this world. Don't look at me so accusingly, he wanted to protest.

What else were we to do? Meggie thought it was a good idea too – well, to be honest, she had expressed a few doubts.

'I don't understand where that giant came from so suddenly!' said Battista. 'Even when I was a child the giants were little more than a fairy tale. I don't know any of the strolling players who ever set eyes on one, except for Dustfinger, and he would always venture further into the mountains than the rest of us.'

Without a word, Farid turned his back on Fenoglio and cut a few more twigs for the stretcher. Presumably the bear would happily have carried his master on his furry back, and Battista had some difficulty in persuading him to get out of the way when they lifted the Black Prince and put him on the stretcher. Only when his master spoke gently to him did the bear calm down, and he lumbered along beside the Prince looking dejected.

Well, come on, Fenoglio, the old man told himself, what are you waiting for? Go after them, he muttered as he followed

Battista, his legs aching. No one's going to carry you. And you'd better pray to whatever you believe in that the Milksop isn't back!



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Light

All these, however, were mere terrors of the night, phantoms of the mind that walk in darkness.

Washington Irving,
The Legend of Sleepy Hollow

The fire was everywhere. It ate its way along the walls and licked down from the ceiling, crept out of the stone, and gave as much light as if the sun itself had risen in the darkened castle to scorch his bloated flesh.

The Adderhead shouted at the Piper until he was hoarse. He struck him in his bony chest with his fists, longing to ram the man's silver nose into his face, deep into the sound flesh that he envied him so much.

The Fire-Dancer was back from the dead for the second time, and the Bluejay had escaped from one of the cells which, so his

father-in-law had always claimed, no prisoner ever left alive. 'Flown away!' whispered his soldiers. 'The bird has flown, and now he's roaming the castle like a hungry wolf. He'll kill us all!'

The Adderhead had handed over the two guards of the cell to Thumbling for punishment, but the Bluejay had already killed six more, and the rumours grew louder with every dead man they found. His soldiers were running away, over the bridge or along the tunnel under the lake, anywhere to get away from the bewitched castle that now belonged to the Bluejay and the Fire-Dancer. Some of them had even jumped into the lake, never to climb out again. The rest were shaking in their shoes like a crowd of terrified children, while the painted walls burnt and the light scorched the Adder's brain and his skin.

'Bring me Four-Eyes!' he shouted, and Thumbling dragged Orpheus into his room. Jacopo crept in at the door too, like a worm that had dug its way out of damp earth.

'Put out the fire!' How his throat hurt! As if the sparks were in there too. 'Put it out at once and bring me back the Bluejay, or I'll cut your slimy tongue out! Is this why you persuaded me to throw him into that cell? So that he could fly away?'

The pale-blue eyes blurred behind the man's glasses – and the flattering tongue sounded as if it had been bathed in precious oil. But it was impossible to mistake the fear in it.

'I told the Piper he ought to post more than two guards outside the cell,' said the sly little snake. So much cleverer than Silvernose, so much mock innocence, even the Adderhead couldn't quite see through it. 'Only a few more hours and the Jay would have been pleading with you to let him bind the book. Ask the guards. They heard him down there writhing like a worm on the hook, groaning and sighing—'

'The guards are dead. I handed them over to Thumbling and told him to make sure their screams could be heard all over the castle.'

Thumbling adjusted his black gloves. 'Four-Eyes is telling the truth. The guards kept bleating over and over that the Bluejay was in a very bad state down in that cell. They heard him screaming and groaning, and they checked a couple of times to make sure he was still alive. I'd like to know how you did it,' he said, his hawk-like gaze resting on Orpheus for a moment. 'But anyway, they said the Jay kept whispering one name again and again ...'

The Adderhead put his hands over his burning eyes. 'What name? My daughter's name, by any chance?'

'No, the name of some other woman,' replied Thumbling.

'Resa. His wife, Your Highness.' Orpheus smiled. The Adderhead was not sure whether his smile expressed deference or self-satisfaction.

The Piper cast a vicious glance at Orpheus. 'My men will soon have caught his wife. And his daughter too!'

'And what use is that to me now?' The Adderhead pressed his fists into his eyes, but he could still see the fire all the same. Pain was cutting him into slices, stinking slices, and now the man to whom he owed it all had fooled him for the second time. He needed the Book! A new Book to heal his flesh. It was hanging off his bones like mud – heavy, damp, stinking mud.

Bluejay.

'Take two of those who tried to run away up on to the bridge where everyone can see them,' he said grimly. 'And you, fetch that dog of yours!' he snapped at Orpheus. 'It must be hungry.'

The men screamed like animals as the black shadow devoured them, and the Adderhead imagined that the cries echoing all the way to his room were the Bluejay's. The man owed him many screams.

Orpheus listened with a smile, and the Night-Mare returned to him like a faithful dog after its meal. Panting, it merged with Orpheus's shadow, and its darkness made even the Adderhead

shudder. Orpheus, however, adjusted his glasses with a satisfied expression. Their round lenses reflected the sparks burning on the walls. Four-Eyes.

‘I’ll bring you back the Bluejay,’ he said, and even against his will the Adderhead felt the confidence in that velvety voice soothing him once again. ‘He hasn’t escaped you, however it may seem. I have bound him in invisible chains. I forged them myself with my black art, and wherever he’s hiding those chains will pull at him and bring back old pain. He knows I am the one sending him the pain, and he knows it will never end as long as I live. So he’ll try to kill me. Set Thumbling to guard my room, and the Bluejay will stumble into his arms. He’s not our problem any more. But the Fire-Dancer is.’

The hatred in his pale face surprised the Adderhead. Usually such hatred comes only after love.

‘So, he’s back from the dead again!’ Loathing clung to every word that Orpheus spoke, slowing his smooth tongue. ‘He’s acting as if he were lord of this castle, but take my advice and his fire will soon be extinguished!’

‘And what advice might that be?’

Orpheus smiled.

‘Send Thumbling to your daughter. Have her thrown into one of the cells, and spread word that she helped the Bluejay to escape. That’ll stop all the nonsense talked that makes your soldiers tremble with fear. As for her beautiful maidservant, lock her up in the cage where the Bluejay himself was held. And tell Thumbling he needn’t treat the girl too gently.’

The fire was still reflected in Orpheus’s glasses. They made his eyes almost invisible, and for a moment the Adderhead felt something he had never felt before – fear of another man. It was an interesting sensation. Like a tingling on the back of the neck, a slight pressure in the stomach ...

‘Exactly what I planned to do,’ he said – and read in Orpheus’s face that he knew he was lying. I’ll have to kill him,

thought the Adderhead. As soon as the new Book is bound.

No man should be cleverer than his master. Particularly not when he controlled so dangerous a dog.



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Made Visible

But writing broke away from the gods and in that rupture much of its power was lost.

Salman Rushdie,
The Power of the Pen

‘**Y**ou must go! You’re not safe anywhere in this castle!’ Dustfinger kept saying it, again and again, and Mo kept shaking his head.

‘I have to find the White Book.’

‘Let me look for it. I’ll write the three words. Even I can write well enough for that!’

‘No, that wasn’t the bargain. Suppose Death comes for Meggie all the same? I bound the Book, I must rid the world of it. And the Adder wants to see you dead as much as me.’

‘I’ll simply slip out of my skin again.’

‘You only just found your way back into it last time.’

How familiar the two of them sounded with each other. Like two sides of a coin, like two faces of the same man.

‘What bargain are you talking about?’

They looked at Resa as if they both wished her far, far away. Mo was pale, but his eyes were dark with anger, and his hand kept going to his old wound. What had they done to him down in that terrible cell?

Dust lay like snow in the room where they were hiding. The plaster on the ceiling was so damp that it had crumbled away in places. The Castle in the Lake was sick. Perhaps it was already dying, but on its walls lambs still slept beside wolves, dreaming of a world that never was. The room had two narrow windows. A dead tree stood in the courtyard below.

Walls, parapets, oriel towers, bridges ... a stony trap, and Resa wanted her wings back. How her skin was itching. As if the feathered quills were just waiting to pierce through again.

‘Mo, what kind of bargain?’ She came between the two men.

When he told her she began crying. Now at last she understood. He was promised to Death whether he stayed or fled. Caught in a trap made of stone and ink. And so was their daughter.

He took her in his arms, but he wasn’t really with her. He was still down in the cell, drowning in hate and fear. His heart was beating so violently that she was afraid it might break in his breast.

‘I’ll kill him,’ she heard him say as she wept into his shoulder. ‘I ought to have done it long ago. And after that I’ll look for the Book.’

She knew only too well who he meant. Orpheus. He pushed her gently away from him and picked up his sword. It was covered with blood, but he wiped the blade clean on his sleeve.

He still wore the black clothes of a bookbinder, although it was a long time since that had been his trade. He made for the door with determination, but Dustfinger barred his way.

‘What’s your idea?!’ he said. ‘Very well, so Orpheus read the words, but you are making them come true!’ He raised his hands, and fire wrote the words in the air, terrible words, all speaking of only one thing. *The Bluejay’s Last Song*.

Mo stretched out his hand as if to extinguish them, but they scorched his fingers and burnt his heart.

‘Orpheus is just waiting for you to come to him!’ said Dustfinger. ‘He’s going to serve you up to the Adderhead on a platter made of ink. Resist it! It’s not a pleasant feeling to read the words that guide your actions. No one knows that better than I do, but they didn’t come true for me either. They have only as much power as you give them. You won’t go to Orpheus, I will. I don’t know much about killing. Even dying didn’t teach me that, but I can steal the books from which he takes the words. And once you can think straight again, we’ll look for the White Book together.’

‘Suppose the Adder’s soldiers find Mo here first?’ Resa was still staring at the burning words. She read them again and again.

Dustfinger passed his hand over the picture fading on the walls of the room, and the painted wolf began to move. ‘I’ll leave you a watchdog, though not quite such a fierce one as Orpheus’s, but it will howl when the soldiers come, and I hope it can hold them off long enough to give you time to find another hiding place. Fire will teach the Adder’s men to fear every shadow.’

The wolf with its burning coat leapt off the wall and followed Dustfinger out. However, the words that had been written in the air were still there, and Resa read them again: *But when the Bluejay would not bow to the Adderhead only one man knew what to do, a stranger who had come from far away to be the Adder’s*

adviser. He understood that the Bluejay could be broken by only one man, and that was himself. So he summoned up all that the Bluejay didn't dare to acknowledge: the fear that made him fearless, the anger that made him invincible. He had him thrown into darkness to fight himself there – to fight the pain still inside him, never forgotten, never healed, all the fear that fetters and chains had given him, the anger that had sown the seeds of fear. He painted dreadful pictures in his heart, pictures of ...

Resa read no more. The words were too terrible. But the fire had burnt the last sentences into her memory.

... and the Bluejay, broken by his own darkness, pleaded with the Adderhead to be allowed to bind him a second Book, even more beautiful than the first. But as soon as the Silver Prince had the Book in his hands he condemned him to die the slowest of all deaths, and the minstrels sang the Last Song of the Bluejay.

Mo had turned his back on the words. He stood there with the dust of countless years around him like grey snow, looking at his hands as if he wasn't sure whether they still did as he told them or obeyed the words burning behind him.

'Mo?' Resa kissed him. She knew that he wouldn't like what she was about to do.

He looked at her absently, his eyes full of darkness.

'I will look for the White Book. I'll find it and write the three words in it for you.' So that the Adderhead dies before Orpheus's words come true, she added in her mind, and before the name Fenoglio gave you kills you.

By the time Mo understood what she had said, she was already lifting the seeds to her mouth. He tried to knock them out of her hand, but she already had them under her tongue.

'No, Resa!'

She flew through the fiery letters. Their heat singed her breast.

'Resa!'

No, this time he was the one who must wait. Stay where you are, she thought. Please, Mo.



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Love Disguised as Hate

Where did this love come from? I don't know; it came to me like a thief in the night [...]. All I could hope was that my crimes were so monstrous that the love was no bigger than a mustard-seed in the shadow of them, and I wished I'd committed even greater ones to hide it more deeply still ... But the mustard-seed had taken root and was growing, and the little green shoot was splitting my heart wide open [...].

Philip Pullman,
The Amber Spyglass

The Adderhead wanted fairy blood, a whole tub full, to bathe his itching skin. Orpheus was writing fairies' nests into the bare branches of the cherry trees growing under his window when he heard soft footsteps behind him. He dropped his pen

so abruptly that it spattered Ironstone's grey feet with ink. The Bluejay!

Orpheus thought he could already feel the sword between his shoulder blades: after all, he himself had stoked the Bluejay's blood-lust, drowning him in anger and helpless rage. How had he managed to get past the guards? There were three outside his door, and Thumbling was waiting in the next room.

However, when Orpheus turned he found not Mortimer but Dustfinger standing behind him.

What was he doing here? Why wasn't he outside the cage where his sobbing daughter sat, letting the Night-Mare eat him?

Dustfinger.

Less than a year ago the mere thought of seeing him would have made Orpheus drunk with happiness – in the bleak room where he was living at the time, surrounded by books that spoke of the longing in his heart but never satisfied it. Longing for a world that bowed to his will, longing to escape his grey failure of a life at last, to become the Orpheus that slumbered inside him, the man whom those who mocked him never saw. Perhaps longing was the wrong word. It sounded too tame, too gentle and resigned. It was a raging desire that drove him, desire for everything he didn't have.

Oh yes, the sight of Dustfinger would have made him very happy back then. But now his heart beat faster for other reasons. The hate he felt still tasted like love, but that didn't tame it. And suddenly Orpheus saw the opportunity for such perfect revenge that he spontaneously smiled.

'Well, if it isn't my old childhood friend. My faithless friend.' Orpheus pushed Violante's Bluejay book under the parchment on which he was writing.

Ironstone ducked behind the inkwell in fear. Fear. Not necessarily a bad feeling. Sometimes it could be very stimulating.

‘I suppose you’re here to steal a few more books from me?’ he went on. ‘That won’t do the Bluejay any good. The words have been read, and they’ll pursue him. That’s the price you pay for making a story your own. But how about you? Have you seen your daughter recently?’

Dustfinger’s expression gave nothing away. He really didn’t know yet! Ah, love. What a perfect tool of revenge. Even the fearless heart that Dustfinger had brought back from the dead was powerless against it.

‘You really should go to her. She’s sobbing in the most heart-rending way, tearing her beautiful hair.’

The look in his eyes! Got you, thought Orpheus. Got you both on the hook now, you and the Bluejay.

‘My black dog is guarding your daughter,’ he went on, and every word tasted as good as spiced wine. ‘I expect she’s terribly afraid. But I’ve ordered my dog not to feast on her sweet flesh and soul ... just yet.’

There – so fear *could* sting Dustfinger after all. His unscarred face turned pale. He stared at Orpheus’s shadow, but the Night-Mare did not emerge from it. The Night-Mare was outside the cage where Brianna sat weeping and calling for her father.

‘I’ll kill you if it so much as touches her. I don’t know much about killing, but for you I’d learn!’ Dustfinger’s face seemed so much more vulnerable without the scars. His clothes and hair were covered with fiery sparks.

Orpheus had to admit it – the Fire-Dancer was still his favourite character. Whatever Dustfinger did to him, however often he betrayed him, it didn’t change that. His heart loved him like a dog. All the more reason to remove him from this story once and for all – although it was still a shame. Orpheus could hardly believe he had come here only to protect the Bluejay. Such high-minded nobility didn’t suit him at all. No, it was time the Fire-Dancer returned to playing a part that was more like himself.

‘You can ransom your daughter!’ Orpheus let every word melt on his tongue.

Oh, sweet revenge. The marten on Dustfinger’s shoulder bared its teeth. Nasty brute.

Dustfinger stroked its brown coat. ‘How?’

Orpheus rose to his feet. ‘Well ... first by putting out the lights you’ve so skilfully brought to this castle. At once.’

The sparks on the walls flared up as if reaching out to burn him, but then they died down. Only those on Dustfinger’s hair and clothes still shone. Yes. What a terrible weapon love could be. Was any knife sharper? Time to thrust it even deeper into his faithless heart.

‘Your daughter is crying her eyes out in the same cage that held the Bluejay,’ Orpheus went on. ‘Of course she looks much more beautiful in there, with that fiery hair. Like a precious bird ...’

The sparks swirled around Dustfinger like a red mist.

‘Bring us the bird who really belongs in that cage. Bring us the Bluejay and your lovely daughter is free. But if you don’t bring him, I’ll feed my black dog on her flesh and her soul. Don’t look at me like that! As far as I’m aware you’ve played the part of traitor once already. I wanted to write you a better part, but you wouldn’t hear of it!’

Dustfinger said nothing, just looked at him.

‘You stole the book from me!’ Orpheus’s voice almost failed him, the words still tasted so bitter. ‘You ranged yourself on the bookbinder’s side, although he snatched you out of your own story, instead of backing me, the man who brought you home! That was cruel, very cruel.’ Tears rose to his eyes. ‘What did you think – that I’d just accept such treachery? No, my plan was to send you back to the dead without a soul, hollow as an insect sucked dry, but I like this revenge even better. I’ll make you a

traitor again. How that will pierce the bookbinder's noble heart!

The flames were leaping from the walls again. They licked up from the floor scorching Orpheus's boots. Ironstone moaned with fear and buried his head in his glass arms. Dustfinger's anger showed in the flames, burning on his face, raining down from the ceiling in sparks.

'Keep your fire away from me!' Orpheus cried. 'I'm the only one who can command the Night-Mare, and your daughter will be the first it eats when it next feels hungry. Which will be soon. I want a trail of fire laid to wherever the Bluejay is hiding, and I'll be the man who shows it to the Adderhead, understand?'

The flames on the walls went out for the second time. Even the candles on the desk burnt out, and all was dark in Orpheus's room. Only Dustfinger himself was still enveloped in sparks, as if the fire were in him.

Why did the look in his eyes make Orpheus feel such shame? Why did his heart still feel love? He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again Dustfinger was gone.

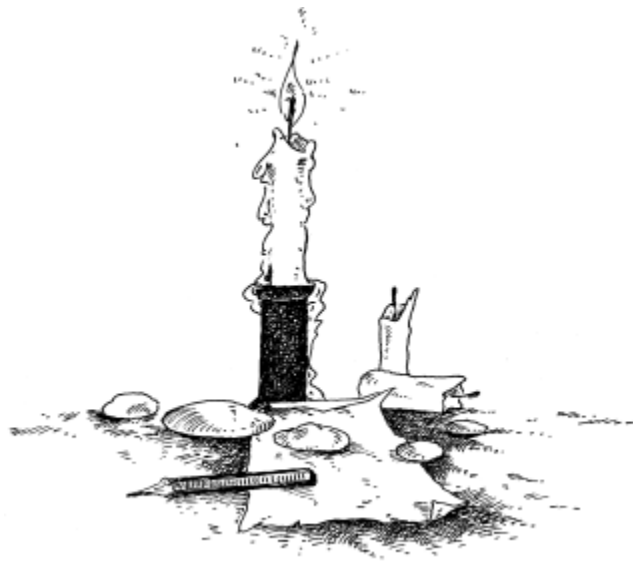
As Orpheus stepped out of the door the guards who were supposed to be keeping watch outside his room came stumbling along the corridor, their faces twisted with fear. 'The Bluejay was here!' they stammered. 'He was all made of fire, and then he suddenly dissolved into smoke. Thumbling has gone to tell the Adderhead.'

Idiots. He'd feed them all to the Night-Mare.

Don't lose your temper, he told himself. You'll soon bring the Adderhead the real Bluejay. And your Night-Mare will eat the Fire-Dancer too.

'Tell the Silver Prince to send some men to the courtyard under my window,' he snarled at the guards. 'They'll find enough fairies' nests there to fill a tub with their blood for him.'

Then he went back to his room and read the nests into the trees. But he saw Dustfinger's face through the letters, as if he were living behind them. As if all the words spoke only of him.



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67

The Other Name

I write your name. Two syllables. Two vowels. Your name inflates you, is bigger than you. You repose in a corner, sleeping; your name awakes you. I write it. You could not be named otherwise. Your name is your juice, your taste, your savor. Called by another name, you vanish. I write it. Your name.

Susan Sontag,
The Letter Scene

The Castle in the Lake had been built to protect a few unhappy children from the world, but the longer Mo walked in its corridors the more he felt as if it had been waiting for another task to fulfil one day: to drown the Bluejay in his own darkness between its painted walls. Dustfinger's fiery wolf ran ahead as if it knew the way, and while Mo followed he killed

four more soldiers. The castle belonged to the Fire-Dancer and the Bluejay, he read it in their faces, and the anger that Orpheus aroused in him made him strike so often that their blood drenched his black clothes. Black. Orpheus's words had turned his heart black too.

You ought to have asked them which way to go instead of killing them, he thought bitterly as he bent to pass through an arched gateway. A flock of doves fluttered up. No swifts. Not one. Where was Resa? Well, where did he suppose? In the Adderhead's bedchamber, searching for the Book he had once bound to save her. A swift could fly fast, very fast, and his own steps were heavy as lead from the words Orpheus had written.

There. Was that the tower into which the Adderhead had retreated? It was as Dustfinger had described it. Two more soldiers ... they staggered back in horror when they saw him. Kill them quickly, Mo, before they scream. Blood. Blood as red as fire. Hadn't red once been his favourite colour? Now the sight of it made him feel ill. He clambered over the dead men, took the silver-grey cloak from one of them, put on the other man's helmet. Maybe the disguise would spare him the killing if he met any more of them.

The next corridor looked familiar, but there were no guards in sight. The wolf loped on, but Mo stopped outside a door and pushed it open.

The dead books. The Lost Library.

He lowered his sword and went in. Dustfinger's sparks glowed in here too, burning the smell of mould and decay out of the air.

Books. He leant the bloodstained sword against the wall, stroked their stained spines, and felt the burden of the words lifting from his shoulders. He was not the Bluejay, not Silvertongue, just Mortimer. Orpheus had written nothing about the bookbinder.

Mo picked up a book. Poor thing, it was a wreck. He took up another and then another – and heard a rustling sound. His hand immediately went to his sword, and Orpheus's words reached for his heart again.

A few piles of books fell over. An arm pushed its way past all the printed corpses, followed by a second arm, without a hand. Balbulus.

'Ah, it's you they're looking for!' He straightened up, ink on the fingers of his left hand. 'Since I hid in here from the Piper, not a soldier's come through this door until today. I expect the mouldy smell keeps them away. But today there've been two here already. They've certainly kept a better watch on you than on me! So, how did you escape them?'

'With the help of fire and feathers,' said Mo, leaning his sword against the wall again. He didn't want to remember. He wanted to forget the Bluejay, just for a few moments, and find happiness instead of misery among parchment and leather-bound covers.

Balbulus followed his glance. No doubt he saw the longing in it. 'I've found a few books that are still good for something. Do you want to see them?'

Mo listened for sounds outside. The wolf was silent, but he thought he heard voices. No. They died away again.

Just for a few moments, then.

Balbulus gave him a book not much bigger than his hand. It had a few holes nibbled in it, but it had obviously escaped mildew. The binding was very well made. His fingers had missed leafing through written pages so much. His eyes were so hungry for words that carried him away, instead of capturing and controlling him. How very much his hand wanted to hold a knife that cut not flesh but paper.

'What's that?' whispered Balbulus.

It had turned dark. The fire on the walls had gone out, and Mo couldn't see the book in his hands any more.

'Silvertongue?'

He turned.

Dustfinger stood in the doorway, a shadow rimmed with fire.

'I've been talking to Orpheus.' His voice sounded different. The composure that Death had left in him was gone. His old desperation, almost forgotten by both of them, was back.

'What's happened?'

Dustfinger lured fire back out of the darkness and made it build a cage among the books, a cage with a girl in tears inside it.

Brianna. Mo saw on Dustfinger's face the same fear he had so often felt himself. Flesh of his flesh. Child. Such a powerful word. The most powerful of all.

Dustfinger had only to look at him, and Mo read it all in his eyes: the Night-Mare watching his daughter, the price he would have to pay to ransom her.

'So?' Mo listened for sounds outside. 'Are the soldiers already out there?'

'I haven't laid the trail yet.'

Mo sensed Dustfinger's fear sharply, as if Meggie were the girl in the cage, as if it were her weeping that came out of the fire.

'What are you waiting for? Lead them here!' he said. 'It's time my hands bound a book again – even if the job must never be finished. Let them capture the bookbinder, not the Bluejay. They won't notice the difference. And I'll banish the Bluejay forever, bury him deep in the dungeon cell below, with the words that Orpheus wrote.'

Dustfinger breathed into the darkness, and instead of the cage the fire formed the sign that Mo had imprinted on the spines of

so many books: a unicorn's head. 'If that's what you want,' he said quietly. 'But if you're playing the bookbinder again, then what part is mine?'

'Your daughter's rescuer,' said Mo. 'My wife's protector. Resa has gone to look for the White Book. Help her to find it, and bring it to me.'

So that I can write the end in it, he thought. Three words, that's all it takes. And suddenly a thought occurred to him and made him smile in all the darkness. Orpheus had not written anything at all about Resa, not a single binding word. Who else had he forgotten?





68

Back

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd
I cried to dream again.

William Shakespeare,
The Tempest, Act 3 Scene 2

Roxane was singing again. For the children who couldn't sleep for fear of the Milksop. And everything Meggie had ever heard about her voice was true. Even the tree seemed to be listening to her, the birds in its topmost branches, the

animals living among its roots, the stars in the dark sky. There was so much comfort in Roxane's voice, although what she sang was often sad, and Meggie heard her longing for Dustfinger in every word. It was a comfort to hear about longing, even if it filled her heart to the brim. Longing for sleep free of fear, and carefree days, for firm ground underfoot, a full stomach, the streets of Ombra, mothers ... and fathers.

Meggie was sitting high up in the tree, outside the nest where Fenoglio had sat writing. She didn't know who to worry about first: Fenoglio and the Black Prince; Farid, who had followed the giant with Battista; or Doria, who had climbed down again to find out if the Milksop had really left. She tried not even to think of her parents, but suddenly Roxane began the song about the Bluejay that Meggie loved most, because it described his captivity in the Castle of Night with his daughter. Some of the songs were more heroic, but only this one also spoke of her father, and it was her father she missed. 'Mo?' she would so much have liked to ask, putting her head on his shoulder. 'Do you think the giant is taking Fenoglio to his children as a toy? Do you think he'll tread on Farid and Battista and crush them if they try to rescue the Prince? Do you think anyone can love two boys with just one heart? Have you seen Resa? And how are you, Mo, how are you?'

'Has the Bluejay killed the Adderhead yet?' one of the children had asked Elinor only yesterday. 'Will he come back soon to save us from the Milksop?'

'Of course he will!' Elinor had replied, glancing at Meggie. Of course ...

'The boy's not back yet,' she heard Elfbane say to Woodenfoot down below her. 'Shall I go and look for him?'

'Why do that?' replied Woodenfoot, lowering his voice. 'He'll come back if he can. And if he doesn't, then they've caught him. I'm sure the soldiers are down there somewhere. I just hope Battista will be careful when he comes back himself.'

‘How can he be careful?’ asked Elfbane, with a grim laugh. ‘The giant behind him, the Milksop in front of him, and the Prince probably dead. We’ll soon be striking up our own last song, and it won’t sound half as good as the songs Roxane sings.’

Meggie buried her face in her arms. Don’t think about it, Meggie, she told herself, just don’t think about it. Listen to Roxane. Dream that everything will be all right. That they’ll all come back safe and sound: Mo, Resa, Fenoglio, the Black Prince, Farid – and Doria. What does the Milksop do to prisoners? No, don’t think about it, don’t ask such questions.

Voices drifted up from down below. Leaning forward, she tried to make something out in the darkness. Was that Battista’s voice? She saw fire, just a small flame, but it gave a bright light. There was Fenoglio! And the Black Prince on a stretcher beside him.

‘Farid?’ she called down.

‘Hush!’ hissed Elfbane, and Meggie pressed her hand to her mouth. The robbers were letting down ropes, and a net to take the Prince.

‘Quick, Battista!’ Roxane’s voice sounded so different when she wasn’t singing. ‘They’re coming!’

She didn’t need to say any more. Horses snorted among the trees, twigs broke under the tread of many boots. The robbers threw down more ropes, and some let themselves down the trunk. Arrows came out of the darkness. Men swarmed out from the surrounding trees like silver beetles. ‘Wait and see – they’ll bide their time until Battista comes back. With the Prince!’ Hadn’t Doria said so? That was why he had gone down himself. And he hadn’t come back.

Farid made the fire flare up. He and Battista placed themselves in front of the Black Prince to protect him. The bear was with them too.

‘What is it? What’s going on?’ Elinor was kneeling beside Meggie, her hair in wild confusion as if bristling with fear. ‘I’d actually dropped off to sleep, would you believe it?’

Meggie did not reply. What could she do? Oh, what could she do? She made her way over to the forked branch where Roxane and the other women were kneeling. Only two of the robbers were with them. All the others were letting themselves down the trunk to help the Prince, but it was a long way to the ground, a terribly long way, and a rain of arrows came from below. Two men fell, screaming, and the women covered the children’s eyes and ears.

‘Where is he?’ Elinor leant so far forward that Roxane pulled her back by force. ‘Where is he?’ she cried again. ‘Someone tell me, is that old fool still alive?’

Fenoglio looked up at them as if he had heard her voice, his lined face full of fear, the fighting all around him. One man fell dead at his feet, and Fenoglio picked up his sword.

‘Look at that, will you?’ cried Elinor. ‘What’s he doing? Does he think he can play the hero in his own damn story?’

I must go down, thought Meggie. I must help Farid and look for Doria! Where was he? Lying dead somewhere among the trees? No, he can’t be. Fenoglio wrote about him! Wonderful things. He can’t be dead. All the same ...

She ran to the ropes, but Elfbane stopped her. ‘Climb up the tree!’ he said urgently. ‘All the women and children must get as far up the tree as they can!’

‘Oh yes, and what are we going to do when we reach the top?’ snapped Elinor. ‘Wait for them to pick us off?’

There was no answer to that question.

‘They have the Prince!’ Minerva’s voice sounded so desperate that everyone looked round. Some of the women began sobbing. Sure enough, they had the Black Prince. They were dragging him off the stretcher where he lay. The bear lay

motionless beside him with an arrow in his coat. Battista had been captured too. Where was Farid?

Where the fire was.

Farid made it bite and burn, but Sootbird was there too, his leathery face pale above his red and black costume. Fire ate fire, the flames licked up the trunk. Meggie thought she could hear the tree groaning. Several smaller trees had already caught fire. The children were crying hard enough to melt anyone's heart.

Oh, Fenoglio, thought Meggie, we don't have much luck with the people we call to our aid. First Cosimo, now the giant.

The giant.

His face appeared among the trees as suddenly as if the mere word had summoned him. His skin had turned dark as the night, and he wore the reflection of the stars on his brow. One foot trod out the fire that was eating at the roots of their tree. The other foot missed Farid and Sootbird so narrowly that Meggie's own scream echoed in her ears.

'Yes! Yes, he's back!' she heard Fenoglio shout. He staggered towards the mighty feet and climbed on to one of its toes as if it were a lifeboat.

But the giant looked up at the crying children enquiringly, as if he had come for something that he couldn't find.

The Milksop's men abandoned their prisoners and ran for their lives again, with their lord in front on his snow-white horse. Only Sootbird stood his ground with a small troop, sending his fire to lick at the giant. The giant stared at the flames, bewildered, and stumbled back when they caught his toes.

'No, please!' Meggie called down. 'Please don't go away again. Help us!'

And suddenly Farid was standing on the giant's shoulder, making flakes of fire rain down from the night. They settled on

the clothes of Sootbird and his men like burning burrs, until they flung themselves down on the forest floor and rolled over and over on the dry leaves. As for the giant, he looked at Farid in astonishment, plucked him off his shoulder as easily as a moth, and placed him on his raised palm. How large his fingers were. Terribly large. And how small Farid looked standing there beside them.

Sootbird and his men were still beating at their burning clothes. The giant stared down at them, irritated. He rubbed his ear as if their screams hurt him, closed his hand around Farid as if he were a precious find, and with the other hand flicked the screaming men away into the forest like a child brushing a spider off its clothes. Then he put his hand to his ear again and looked up at the tree, still searching for something – as if he had suddenly remembered what he had come for.

‘Roxane!’

It was Darius’s voice that Meggie heard echoing through the tree, hesitant and firm at the same time. ‘Roxane! I think he came back because of you. Sing!’



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69

In the Adderhead's Bedchamber

And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane!

Salman Rushdie,
Midnight's Children

Resa flew after one of the servants who were carrying buckets of blood and water to the Adderhead's bedchamber.

He sat there in a silver tub, red up to his neck, gasping and cursing, such a terrible sight that Resa feared for Mo more than ever. What revenge would make up for such suffering?

Thumbling looked around when she flew to the wardrobe by the door, but she ducked in good time. It could be useful to be small. Dustfinger's sparks were burning on the walls. Three

soldiers were flicking at them with damp cloths, while the Adderhead put his bloodstained hand over his smarting eyes. His grandson stood beside the tub, arms folded, as if that would protect him from his grandfather's bad temper. What a small, thin child he was, as handsome as his father and delicately built like his mother. But unlike Violante, Jacopo didn't resemble his grandfather at all, although he imitated the Adderhead's every gesture.

'She didn't.' He thrust out his chin. He had copied that from his mother, although presumably he didn't know it.

'Oh no? Then who else helped the Bluejay if not your mother?'

A servant poured the contents of his bucket over the Adderhead's back. Resa felt sick when she saw the blood running over the pale nape of his neck. Jacopo too looked at his grandfather with both fear and disgust – and quickly glanced away when the Adderhead caught him at it.

'Yes, you just look at me!' he snarled at his grandson. 'Your mother helped the man who did this to me.'

'She didn't. The Bluejay has flown away! Everyone says he can fly, and they say he's invulnerable too.'

The Adderhead laughed. His breath whistled. 'Invulnerable? I'll show you just how invulnerable he is once I've caught him again. I'll give you a knife and you can find out for yourself.'

'But you won't catch him.'

The Adderhead smacked his hand down in the bath of blood, splashing Jacopo's pale tunic with red. 'Watch out. You're getting more and more like your mother.'

Jacopo seemed to be wondering whether this was a good thing or not.

Where was the White Book? Resa looked around her. Chests, clothes thrown over a chair, the bed untidy. The Adderhead slept poorly. Where did he hide it? His life depended on the

Book, his immortal life. Resa looked for a casket, perhaps a precious cloth in which it was wrapped, even though it stank and was rotting ... but suddenly the room went completely dark, so dark that only sounds remained: the splashing of the bloody water, the soldiers breathing hard, Jacopo's cry of alarm.

‘What’s that?’

Dustfinger's sparks had suddenly died down. Resa felt the bird's heart in her breast beating even faster than usual. What had happened? Something must have happened, and it couldn't be anything good.

One of the soldiers lit a torch, putting his hand around the flame to keep it from dazzling his master.

‘At last!’ The Adderhead's voice sounded both relieved and surprised. He waved to the servants, and they went on pouring the contents of their buckets over his itching skin. Where had they caught all the fairies? Fairies slept at this time of year.

The door opened as if the story itself were answering her, and Orpheus came in. ‘Well?’ he asked with a deep bow. ‘Were there enough fairies, Your Highness? Or shall I get you some more?’

‘This will do for the time being.’ The Adderhead filled his hands with the red water and dipped his face into it. ‘Do you have anything to do with the fire going out?’

‘Do I have anything to do with it?’ Orpheus smiled with such self-satisfaction that Resa longed to fly down and peck his pale face to pieces with her beak. ‘I do indeed,’ he went on. ‘I’ve persuaded the Fire-Dancer to change sides.’

No. It couldn't be true. He was lying.

The bird in her pecked at a fly, and Jacopo looked up. Keep your head down, Resa, she told herself, even though it's dark. She wished the feathers on her breast and throat weren't so white.

‘Good. But I hope you didn’t promise him any reward for it!’ The Adderhead plunged deep into the bloody water. ‘He’s made me a laughing-stock to my men. I want to see him dead, and dead beyond recall this time. But that can wait. What about the Bluejay?’

‘The Fire-Dancer will lead us to him. For no reward at all.’ The words were terrible enough, but the beauty of Orpheus’s voice made them even worse. ‘He’ll lay a trail of flames, and your soldiers will only have to follow it.’

No. No. Resa began trembling. Dustfinger surely hadn’t betrayed Mo again. No.

A suppressed cry came from her bird-breast, and Jacopo looked up at her again. But even if he did see her, there was nothing there but a trembling swift lost in the dark human world.

‘Is everything ready for the Bluejay to set to work at once?’ asked Orpheus. ‘The sooner he’s finished, the sooner you can kill him.’

Oh, Meggie, what kind of being did you read here? Resa thought desperately. With his shining glasses and flatteringly beautiful voice, Orpheus seemed to her like a demon.

The Adderhead heaved himself out of his bath, groaning. He stood there as bloodstained as a newborn child. Jacopo instinctively flinched back, but his grandfather beckoned him closer.

‘My lord, you need to stay in the bath longer for the blood to take effect!’ said one of the servants.

‘Later!’ replied the Adderhead impatiently. ‘You think I want to be sitting in the tub when they bring me my worst enemy? Give me those towels!’ he told Jacopo sharply. ‘And quick, or do you want me to put you in the dark cell with your mother? Did I say you were getting more like her? No, it’s your father you look like – more and more like him all the time.’

With a black look, Jacopo handed him the towels lying ready beside the tub. 'Clothes!'

The servants hurried over to the chests, and Resa hid in the dark again, but the voice of Orpheus followed her like a deadly scent.

'Your Grace, I ... er ...' He cleared his throat. 'I've kept my promise. The Bluejay will soon be your prisoner again, and he'll bind you a new book. I think I've earned a reward.'

'Oh, do you?' The servants were putting black garments on the Adderhead's blood-red skin. 'And what were you thinking of?'

'Well. Do you remember the book I mentioned to you? I would still very much like to have it back, and I'm sure you can find it for me. But if that can't be done at once –' oh, the vanity of the gesture as he smoothed his pale fair hair! '– I would also accept your daughter's hand in marriage as my reward for the delivery of the Bluejay.'

Orpheus.

Resa thought of the day when she had first set eyes on him, in Elinor's house, accompanied by Mortola and Basta. At the time she had only noticed that he didn't resemble the men with whom Mortola usually liked to surround herself. He looked strangely harmless, almost innocent, with that childlike face. How stupid she had been. He was worse than any of them, much, much worse.

'Your Highness.' That was the Piper's voice. Resa hadn't heard him come in. 'We've caught the Bluejay. Him and the book illuminator. Shall we bring the Jay straight to you?'

'Aren't you going to tell us how you caught him?' purred Orpheus. 'Did you pick up his scent with that silver nose of yours?'

The Piper replied in as reluctant a voice as if every word bit his tongue. 'The Fire-Dancer gave him away. With a trail of

flames.'

Resa wanted to spit out the seeds so that she could shed human tears.

But Orpheus laughed out loud, happy as a child. 'And who told you about that trail? Come on, out with it!'

It took the Piper a long time to answer. 'You, who else?' he said hoarsely at last. 'And some day I'll find out what devilry you used to do it.'

'Well, he's done it, anyway!' said the Adderhead. 'After you let the Jay escape twice. Take the prisoner to the Hall of a Thousand Windows. Chain him to the table where he's to bind the book, and have every move he makes watched. If this new Book makes me sick too, I'll cut your heart out with my own hands, Piper, and believe me, a heart's not as easily replaced as a nose.'

Bird-thoughts were obscuring Resa's mind. It frightened her, but how was she to reach Mo without wings? And even if you do fly to him, she asked herself, what then? Are you going to peck out the Piper's eyes so that he can't see the Bluejay escape? Fly away, Resa, it's all over, she thought. Save your unborn child even if you can't save its father. Go back to Meggie. Birdlike fears filled her, birdlike fears and human pain – or was it the other way around? Was she going crazy? Crazy like Mortola?

She perched there, trembling, waiting for the bedchamber to empty and for the Adderhead to go and see his prisoner. Why did Dustfinger give him away, she wondered. Why? What did Orpheus promise him? What can be worth more than the life Mo gave him back?

The Adderhead, Orpheus, the Piper, the soldiers, two servants with the cushions to support their master's aching flesh – Resa saw them all go, but just as she thought she was alone and was putting her head over the edge of the wardrobe, there stood Jacopo staring straight up at her.

One of the servants came back to fetch the Adderhead his coat.

‘See that bird up there?’ Jacopo asked. ‘Catch it for me!’

But the servant dragged him unceremoniously to the door. ‘You don’t give the orders around here! Go and see your mother. I’m sure she’ll be glad of company where she is now!’

Jacopo resisted, but the servant pushed him roughly through the doorway. Then he closed the door – and came over to the wardrobe. Resa retreated. She heard him pushing something in front of the wardrobe. Fly into his face, she told herself. But then where? The door was closed, the windows draped. The servant threw a black coat at her. She fluttered against the door, against the walls, heard the man cursing. Where could she go? She flew up to the chandelier hanging from the ceiling, but something hit her wing. It hurt, it hurt badly, and she fell.

‘You just wait, I’ll wring your neck! Who knows, maybe you won’t taste bad. Sure to be better than what our fine master gives us to eat.’ Hands reached for her. She tried to fly away, but her wing hurt, and the man’s fingers held on tightly. In desperation, she pecked them with her beak.

‘Let it go!’

Bewildered, the servant turned, and Dustfinger struck him to the ground. There was fire behind him. A traitor’s fire. Gwin was staring hungrily at her, but Dustfinger shooed him away. Resa tried to peck his hands when he reached for her, but she had no strength left, and he carefully lifted her from the floor and stroked her feathers.

‘What’s the matter with your wing? Can you move it?’

The bird in her trusted him, as all wild creatures did, but her human heart remembered what the Piper had said. ‘Why did you give Mo away?’

‘Because that’s what he wanted. Spit the seeds out, Resa! Have you forgotten that you’re human?’

Perhaps I want to forget it, she thought, but she obediently spat the little seeds out into his hand. This time none were missing, but she still felt the bird growing stronger and stronger inside her. Small and large, large and small, skin with feathers, skin without feathers ... she stroked her arms, felt fingers again, not claws, felt tears in her eyes, a woman's tears.

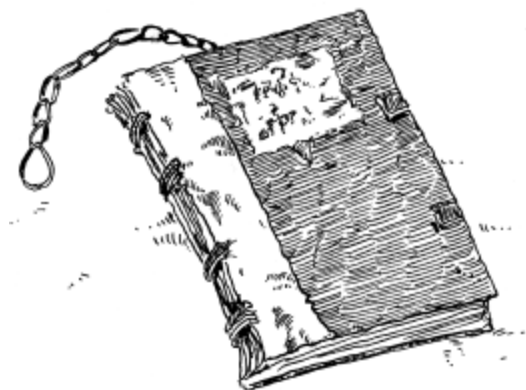
‘Did you see where the White Book is hidden?’

She shook her head. Her heart was so glad that it could love him again.

‘We have to find it, Resa,’ Dustfinger whispered. ‘Your husband is going to bind the Adder another book, remembering his old trade and forgetting the Bluejay, and in that way he will be safe from Orpheus's words. But that book must never be finished, do you understand?’

Yes, she understood. They looked everywhere by the light of the fire, groping among damp towels, clothes and boots, swords, pitchers, silver salvers and embroidered cushions. They even reached into the bloody water. When they heard footsteps outside Dustfinger dragged the unconscious servant with him, and they hid behind the wardrobe on which Resa had been perching. For a bird, the room had seemed as large as a whole world, but now it seemed too cramped to breathe in. Dustfinger placed himself in front of Resa to protect her, but the servants who came in were too busy emptying their master's bath of blood to notice anything. They cursed as they cleared the damp towels away, covering up for their disgust at the Adderhead's rotting flesh with mockery. Then they carried the tub out and left Dustfinger and Resa alone again.

Search ... in every corner, in every chest, in and under the tumbled bed. Search for the Book.



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70

Burning Words

It brewed in her as she eyed the pages full to the brims of their bellies with paragraphs and words.

You bastards, she thought.

You lovely bastards.

Don't make me happy. Please, don't fill me up and let me think that something good can come of any of this.

Markus Zusak,
The Book Thief

Farid found Doria. When they carried him to the tree Meggie thought at first that the giant had crushed him, just as he had crushed the Milksop's men, who lay in the frosty grass like broken dolls.

‘No, it wasn’t the giant,’ said Roxane, as they put Doria down with the other injured men: the Black Prince and Woodenfoot, Silkworm and Hedgehog. ‘This is the work of humans.’

Roxane had made one of the lowest nests into a sickroom. Luckily there were only two dead among the robbers, while the Milksop had lost many men. Even fear of his brother-in-law wasn’t going to bring him back another time.

Sootbird too was dead. He lay on the grass with his neck broken, staring up at the sky with empty eyes. Wolves prowled among the trees, lured by the smell of blood. But they dared not come any closer, because the giant was curled up like a child under the tree with its nests, sleeping as deeply as if Roxane’s singing had sent him into the realm of dreams for ever.

Doria did not come round when Minerva bandaged his bleeding head, and Meggie sat beside him as Roxane cared for the other wounded. Hedgehog was in a very bad way, but the other men’s injuries would heal. Fortunately the Black Prince had only a couple of broken ribs. He wanted to go down to his bear, but Roxane had forbidden it, and Battista had to keep assuring him that the bear was already chasing snow hares again, now that Roxane had pulled out the arrow from his furry shoulder. But Doria didn’t move. He just lay there, his brown hair full of blood.

‘What do you think? Will he ever wake up again?’ Meggie asked as Roxane bent over him.

‘I don’t know,’ Roxane replied. ‘Talk to him. Sometimes that calls them back.’

Talk to him. What should she tell Doria? He had asked her about the other world again and again, so in a soft voice Meggie began talking to him about horseless carriages and flying machines, ships without sails and devices that carried voices from one part of the world to another. Elinor came to see how she was. Fenoglio sat beside her for a while. Even Farid came and held her hand while she held Doria’s, and for the first

time Meggie felt as close to him as she had when the two of them followed her captured parents with Dustfinger. Can one heart love two boys at once?

‘Farid,’ said Fenoglio quietly after a while, ‘let’s see what your fire can tell us about the Bluejay, and then this story will be brought to an end. A good end.’

‘Maybe we ought to send the giant to the Bluejay!’ said Silkworm. Roxane had cut an arrow out of his arm, and his tongue was heavy with the wine she had given him to dull the pain. The Milksop had left all sorts of things behind: wine and blankets, weapons, riderless horses.

‘Have you forgotten where the Bluejay is?’ asked the Black Prince. Meggie was so glad he was alive. ‘No giant can wade through the Black Lake. Even if they did once like to look at their reflections in its water.’

No, it wouldn’t be as simple as that.

‘Come on, Meggie, let’s ask the fire,’ said Farid, but Meggie was reluctant to let go of Doria’s hand.

‘You go. I’ll stay with him,’ said Minerva, and Fenoglio whispered, ‘Don’t look so anxious! Of course the boy will wake up again! Have you forgotten what I told you? His story is only just beginning.’

But Doria’s pale face made that hard to believe.

The branch that Farid knelt on to summon the fire was as broad as the road outside Elinor’s garden gate. As Meggie crouched beside him, Fenoglio looked suspiciously up at the children sitting in the branches above them watching the sleeping giant.

‘Don’t you dare!’ he called, pointing to the fir cones in their small hands. ‘The first of you to throw one of those at the giant will go down after it. I promise you!’

‘But they *will* throw one sometime, and then what?’ asked Farid as he carefully sprinkled a little ash on the tree’s wooden

skin. There wasn't much left, even though he gathered it up again meticulously every time he'd used it. 'What will the giant do when he wakes up?'

'How would I know?' grumbled Fenoglio, casting a slightly worried look downwards. 'I just hope poor Roxane doesn't have to spend the rest of her life singing him to sleep.'

The Black Prince came over to them too. Battista had to support him. He sat down beside Meggie without a word. The fire was sleepy today. However hard Farid enticed and flattered it, it seemed forever before flames rose from the ashes. The giant began humming to himself in his sleep. Jink jumped up on to Farid's knees, a dead bird in his mouth, and suddenly the pictures came: Dustfinger in a courtyard, surrounded by large cages. There was a girl in one of them, weeping. Brianna. A black figure stood between her and her father.

'Night-Mare!' whispered Battista. Meggie looked at him in alarm. The picture dissolved into greyish smoke, and another appeared in the heart of the flames. Farid took Meggie's hand, and Battista uttered a soft curse. Mo. He was chained to a table. The Piper was with him. And the Adderhead, his swollen face looking even more terrible than Meggie had seen it in her worst dreams. Leather and blank sheets of paper lay on the table.

'He's binding him another White Book!' whispered Meggie. 'What does that mean?' In alarm, she looked at Fenoglio.

'Meggie!' Farid drew her attention to the fire again.

Letters were rising from the flames, burning letters that formed into words.

'What the devil is that!' Fenoglio uttered. 'Who wrote that?'

The words blew away and went out among the branches before anyone could read them. But the fire gave Fenoglio the answer to his question. A round, pale face appeared in the flames, its circular glasses looking like a second pair of eyes.

'Orpheus!' Farid whispered.

The flames burnt low, slipping back into the ashes as if returning to their nest, but a few fiery words still drifted through the air. *Bluejay ... fear ... broke ... die ...*

‘What does that mean?’ asked the Black Prince.

‘It’s a long story, Prince,’ Fenoglio replied wearily. ‘And I’m afraid the wrong man has written the end of it.’



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The Bookbinder

The real author was neither one of us: a fist is more than the sum of its fingers.

**Margaret Atwood,
*The Blind Assassin***

Fold. Cut. The paper was good, better than last time. Mo's fingertips felt the fibres on its pale white surface, ran along the edges in search of memories. And they came, filling his heart and mind with a thousand images, a thousand and more forgotten days. The smell of the glue took him back to all the places where he had been alone with a sick book, and the familiar gestures made him feel his old satisfaction in giving new life and beauty to a book, saving it from time's sharp teeth, at least for a while. He'd forgotten the peace that came when his hands were doing their work. Fold, cut, pull a thread

through the paper. Mortimer was back again: Mortimer the bookbinder, for whom a knife didn't have to be sharp because a sharp blade killed better, and who wasn't threatened by the words, because he was only making them new clothes.

'You're taking your time, Bluejay.'

The Piper's voice brought him back to the Hall of a Thousand Windows.

Don't let it happen, Mortimer, he told himself. Simply imagine that the silver-nosed man is still in his own book, is nothing but a voice coming out of the letters on the page. The Bluejay isn't here. Orpheus's words must look for him somewhere else.

'You know you're going to die when you've finished it. That's what makes you so slow, am I correct?' The Piper struck him so hard in the back with his gloved fist that Mo almost cut his own hands, and the Bluejay surfaced for a moment, thinking what it would be like to plunge the blade that cut the paper into the Piper's breast.

Mo forced himself to put the knife aside and picked up another sheet of paper, seeking peace in gluing all that whiteness together.

The Piper was right. He was taking his time, not because he was afraid of dying but because this book must never be finished, and the only reason for every move he made was to bring back Mortimer Folchart, the bookbinder who could not be bound by Orpheus's words. Mo hardly felt them any more. All the despair that had seeped into his heart in that dark cell, all the rage and hopelessness, had faded as if his hands had washed them out of his heart.

But what would happen if Dustfinger and Resa didn't find the other White Book? Suppose the Night-Mare devoured Brianna and her father? Would he stand in this hall for ever then, binding blank pages? Not for ever, Mo. You're not immortal. Luckily.

The Piper would kill him. He'd been waiting to do it ever since they first met in the Castle of Night. And, of course, the strolling players would sing about the death of the Bluejay, not Mortimer Folchart. But what would become of Resa and the unborn child? And what about Meggie? Don't think, Mortimer, he told himself. Cut, fold, stitch, win yourself some time, even if you don't yet know what for. When you're dead Resa can fly away and find Meggie. Meggie ...

Please, his heart pleaded with the White Women, let my daughter live! I will go with you, but leave Meggie here. Her life is only just beginning, though she may not know yet which world she wants to live it in.

Cutting, folding, stitching – he thought he saw Meggie's face on the blank paper. He almost felt her beside him as he had in the Old Chamber in the Castle of Night, the room where Violante's mother had lived. Violante ... they'd thrown her into one of the cells. Mo knew exactly what would frighten her most down there: she would be afraid of the darkness taking what little vision she had from her. The Adder's daughter still moved him, and he would gladly have helped her, but the Bluejay must sleep.

Four candles had been lit for him. They didn't give much light, but they were better than nothing. The chains didn't make working any easier either. Every time he moved, their clinking reminded him that he wasn't in his workshop in Elinor's garden.

The door opened.

'There you are!' Orpheus's voice echoed through the empty hall. 'This role suits you much better! What made that old fool Fenoglio think of turning a bookbinder into a robber?'

He stopped in front of Mo with a triumphant smile, just too far away for the knife to reach him. Yes, Orpheus would think of that kind of thing. As usual, his breath smelt sweetish.

‘You ought to have known Dustfinger would betray you some time. He betrays everyone – and believe me, I know what I’m talking about. It’s the part he plays best. But presumably you couldn’t pick and choose who’d help you.’

Mo picked up the leather intended for the cover. It was red, like the cover of the first book.

‘Ah, so you’re not talking to me any more! Well, I can understand that.’ Orpheus had never looked happier.

‘Leave him to work, Four-Eyes! Or do you want me telling the Adderhead that he has to live in his itching skin a little longer, just because you felt like a nice chat?’ The Piper’s voice sounded even more strained than usual. Orpheus wasn’t making himself many friends.

‘Don’t forget, your master will soon be rid of that skin, Piper, and he owes it all to me!’ he replied in a supercilious tone. ‘Your powers of persuasion haven’t impressed our bookbinding friend much, if I remember rightly.’

So the two of them were competing to see who could be closest to the Adder. At the moment Orpheus seemed to hold the better cards, but perhaps that could be changed.

‘What are you talking about, Orpheus?’ said Mo, without looking up from his work. He tasted sweet revenge on his tongue. ‘The Adderhead need feel grateful to no one but the Piper. I was careless. I ran straight into their arms. You had nothing at all to do with it.’

‘What?’ Piqued, Orpheus fiddled with his glasses.

‘That’s exactly how I’ll tell the tale to the Adderhead. As soon as he’s had a good sleep.’ Mo cut through the leather and imagined that he was cutting the web Orpheus had spun around him.

The Piper narrowed his eyes, as if that would help him to see more clearly what game the Bluejay was playing. The Bluejay

isn't here, Piper, thought Mo. But how could you understand that?

'Careful, bookbinder!' Orpheus took a clumsy step towards him. His voice was almost cracking. 'Use your silver tongue to spread lies about me and I'll have it cut out on the spot!'

'Oh yes? Who by?'

Mo looked directly at the Piper.

'I don't want to see my daughter in this castle,' he said softly. 'I don't want anyone looking for her after the Bluejay is dead.'

The Piper returned his glance – and smiled. 'That's a promise. The Bluejay has no daughter,' he said. 'And he'll keep his tongue too. So long as it speaks the right words.'

Orpheus bit his lips so hard that they turned as pale as his skin. Then he moved close to Mo's side.

'I'll write new words!' he hissed in his ear. 'Words that will make you writhe like a worm on the hook!'

'Write what you like,' replied Mo, cutting through the leather again.

The bookbinder wouldn't feel the words.

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So Many Tears

... from the beginning of time,
in childhood, I thought
that pain meant
I was not loved.
It meant I loved.

Louise Glück,
Ararat

She was crying! Jacopo had never heard his mother cry before. Not even when they brought his father back from the forest, dead. He hadn't cried then either, but that was different.

Should he call down to her? He knelt on the edge of the shaft and stared into the darkness. He couldn't see her, only hear her. The weeping sounded terrible. It scared him. His mother didn't

cry. His mother was always strong, always proud. She didn't take him in her arms, like Brianna. Brianna hugged him even when he'd been cruel to her. 'It's because you look like your father!' the maids in the kitchen said. 'Brianna was in love with your father!' She was still in love with him. She had a coin with his picture on it in the bag at her belt; she sometimes kissed it in secret, and she wrote his name on the walls. She wrote it in the air and in the dust. She was so stupid.

The sobbing down below grew even more violent, and Jacopo put his hands over his ears. It sounded as if his mother were breaking into small pieces, such tiny pieces that no one would ever be able to put her together again. But he wanted to keep her!

'Your grandfather will take you with him,' said the servants. 'Back to the Castle of Night, so that you can play with his son.' But Jacopo didn't want to go to the Castle of Night. He wanted to go back to Ombra. That was his castle. And he was frightened of his grandfather, who stank and gasped for air, and had skin so spongy you were scared you might dig holes in it with your fingers.

It must be all wet with her tears down there. She sounded as if she'd soon be drowning in them! No wonder she was so sad. She couldn't read any books in the darkness, and his mother wasn't happy without books. She loved nothing so much. She loved them far more than him, but never mind that. He didn't want her marrying Four-Eyes all the same. Jacopo hated Four-Eyes. His voice was like melted sugar on your skin.

He liked the Bluejay. And the Fire-Dancer. But soon they'd both be dead. Orpheus was going to feed the Fire-Dancer to the Night-Mare, and as soon as the Bluejay had finished the new Book they'd flay him. His grandfather had once made him watch a man being flayed alive. Jacopo had hidden away from the victim's screams in the furthest corner of his heart, but he had still heard them there.

It was quiet. His mother had stopped crying. Had she cried herself to death?

The guards took no notice of him as he bent far over the edge of the black shaft. 'Mother?'

The word didn't pass his lips easily. He never called her Mother. It was as Her Ugliness that he thought of her. But now she had been crying.

'Jacopo?'

She was still alive.

'Is the Bluejay dead?'

'Not yet. He's binding the book.'

'Where is Brianna?'

'In one of the cages.' He was jealous of Brianna. Violante liked Brianna better than him. She was allowed to sleep with his mother, who talked to her much more often than she talked to him, her son. But Brianna comforted him too when he'd hurt himself, or when the Milksop's men taunted him about his dead father. And she was very beautiful.

'Orpheus—' he began, but one of the guards grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him to his feet.

'That's enough chatter!' he said. 'Get out.'

Jacopo tried to wriggle free, but it was no good.

'Let her out!' he shouted, beating his fists against the man's armed chest. 'Let her out this minute!'

But the soldier only laughed.

'Hark at him, will you!' he said to the other guard. 'Mind you don't end up in that cell yourself, midget. Your grandfather has a son now. So his grandson doesn't count for much, specially when he's Cosimo's brat and his mother is thick as thieves with the Bluejay.'

He pushed Jacopo away so roughly that he fell over and Jacopo wished he could make flames come out of his hands,

like the Fire-Dancer, or kill them all with a sword, the way the Bluejay had killed so many men.

‘Jacopo?’ he heard his mother call from down below, but when he turned back to the edge of the shaft the soldiers barred his way.

‘Get out, I tell you!’ one of them snapped. ‘Or I’ll tell Four-Eyes to feed *you* to the Night-Mare. I bet you’re not half as tough as the illuminator they’re keeping in reserve for it.’

Jacopo kicked the man’s knee as hard as he could, and escaped before the other guard could grab hold of him.

The passages down which he stumbled were so dark that he saw a thousand monsters in the shadows. It had been better when there was fire burning on all the walls, much better. Where was he to go? Back to the room where they’d locked him in with his mother? No, there were beetles there that crawled into your nose and ears. Orpheus had sent them. He’d told the boy so himself, laughing. Jacopo had changed his clothes three times already to get rid of the beetles, but he could still feel them everywhere.

Perhaps he ought to go to the cage where Brianna was? No, the Night-Mare was outside it. Jacopo crouched on the stone floor and buried his face in his hands. He wished them all to hell, Orpheus and the Piper and his grandfather. He wanted to be like the Bluejay and the Black Prince – and then he’d kill them all. Every last one of them. That’d soon stop them laughing. And then he’d sit on the throne of Ombra and attack the Castle of Night, just like his father. But he would conquer it and take all its silver to Ombra, and the strolling players would sing songs about him, and he’d make them put on a show at the castle every day, just for him, and the Fire-Dancer would write his name in the sky, and his mother would curtsy to him, and he’d marry a girl as beautiful as Brianna ...

He saw it all so clearly in his mind’s eye as he sat there, in the darkness that protected his grandfather’s eyes. He saw it as

clearly as the pictures that Balbulus had painted for him.

There would be a book about him. Jacopo. A book as magnificent as the one about the Bluejay. Not empty and mouldy like ...

Jacopo raised his head

... the White Book.

Yes. Why not? That'd certainly make them laugh on the other side of their faces!

Jacopo stood up. It would be easy. He must just make sure his grandfather didn't notice that it was gone at once. He'd better leave another book in its place. But which?

He rested his hands on his trembling knees.

Orpheus had had his books taken away, and his mother's were all gone too. But there were other books in this castle, sick books, as sick as his grandfather's. They were in the room where the Bluejay had been caught.

It was a long way there, and Jacopo got lost a couple of times, but finally the smell of decay guided him – the same smell that surrounded his grandfather – and so did the sooty trail, barely visible in the light of his torch, laid by the Fire-Dancer to give the Bluejay away. Why had he done it? For silver, like Sootbird? What would he buy with the silver? A castle? A woman? A horse?

'Trust your friends even less than your enemies, Jacopo.' That was what his grandfather had taught him. 'There are no such things as friends. Not for a prince.' At one time his grandfather often used to talk to him, but that was long ago. *He has a son now, Jacopo.*

He chose a book that wasn't too big – the White Book was not very big either – and put it under his tunic.

There were two guards outside his grandfather's bedchamber. So he was back from seeing the Bluejay? Perhaps he'd killed him already? No, the new Book couldn't be finished yet. Such

things took a long time, Balbulus had told him so. But when it was finished his grandfather was going to make the Bluejay scream, and either marry off his mother to Four-Eyes or leave her in that cell until she broke into tiny little pieces. And they would take Jacopo to the Castle of Night with them.

Jacopo straightened his clothes and wiped the tears from his eyes. He hadn't even noticed them. They blurred everything, the guards and the light of their torches. Stupid. Crying was stupid.

'I want to see my grandfather!'

How they grinned at each other! The Bluejay would kill them all. Every man of them.

'He's asleep. Get out.'

'He can't sleep, you idiot!' Jacopo's shrill voice rose. Only a few months ago he would have stamped his foot, but he'd learnt that that didn't work particularly well. 'Thumbling sent me. I'm to take him his sleeping medicine.'

The guards exchanged uncertain glances. Luckily he was cleverer than any of them. Much cleverer.

'Very well, in you go!' growled one of them. 'But mind you don't start carrying on about your mother to him, because if you do I'll chuck you into that cell with my own hands, understand?'

You're a dead man, thought Jacopo as he walked past the guard. Dead. Dead. Dead. Don't you know that yet? Oh, how good this felt!

'What do you want?' His grandfather was sitting on the bed with two servants beside him, wiping the fairy blood off his legs. His eyelids were heavy from the poppy-juice he took when he wanted to sleep. And why shouldn't he sleep now? The Bluejay was caught, and was binding Death in another book for him.

‘What are you going to do to the Bluejay when he’s finished?’ Jacopo knew exactly what kinds of stories his grandfather liked to tell.

The Adderhead laughed and impatiently waved the servants away. Bowing and scraping, they made their way to the door.

‘Maybe you do take after me, even if you look like your father.’ The Adderhead let himself drop on his side, groaning. ‘What would *you* do to him first?’ His tongue was already as heavy as his eyelids.

‘I don’t know. Pull out his fingernails?’

Jacopo went over to the bed. There it was, the cushion that the Adderhead always had with him. To prop up his sick flesh, they said. But Jacopo knew better. He’d often seen his grandfather put his hand under the heavy fabric to feel the leather binding with his fingers. Once he had even caught a glimpse of the blood-soaked covers. No one paid any attention to what a child saw. Not even the Adderhead, who trusted no one but himself.

‘His fingernails? Hm. Painful, yes. I hope my son will get ideas like that once he’s your age. Although why does a man need a son when he’s immortal? I ask myself that question more and more frequently. Why does a man need a wife? Or daughters ...’

The last words were barely audible. The Adderhead opened his mouth, and a snore came out. The lizard-like eyelids closed, and his left hand clutched the cushion in which his death was hidden. But Jacopo had small, slender hands, not at all like his grandfather’s. Very carefully, he undid the ribbons tying the fabric, put his fingers inside the cushion and took out the Book, the White Book – although it really should be called the Red Book now. His grandfather turned his head, and his breath rattled in his sleep. Jacopo reached under his tunic for the volume he had taken from the Lost Library, and exchanged it for its red twin.

‘My grandfather’s asleep,’ he told the guards when he came out of the room. ‘And you’d better not wake him or he’ll pull your fingernails out.’



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73

The Night-Mare

What should he fear who fears not death itself?

Friedrich Schiller,
The Robbers

Resa had flown away to Silvertongue in the Hall of a Thousand Windows. ‘The bird will never leave you again, Resa!’ Dustfinger had warned her, but she had put the seeds into her mouth all the same.

He had had great difficulty in dragging her out of the bedchamber before the Silver Prince came back. The despair in her face went to his heart. They had not found the White Book, and both of them knew what that meant: it wasn’t the Adderhead who would die, but the Bluejay – by the hand of the Piper, Thumbling, or the White Women coming for him because

he hadn't been able to pay the price Death demanded for his life.

Resa had flown to him so that Silvertongue would not be alone when he died. Or did she still hope for some miracle to save him? Perhaps. Dustfinger had not told her that Death was going to take him again too – and then her daughter.

'If you don't find the Book,' Silvertongue had whispered to him before sending him away to lay the fiery trail for the Piper, 'then at least let us try to save our daughters.'

Our daughters ... Dustfinger knew where to find Brianna, but how was he to protect Meggie from the Piper, or the White Women themselves?

Of course the Piper's men had tried to hold him fast once he'd led them to the Bluejay, but it was easy to escape them. They were still looking for him, but the darkness in the castle hid the Adderhead's enemies as well as easing the pain in his eyes.

Orpheus seemed very sure that his black dog was enough to guard Brianna. Two torches burnt beside the cage where she sat, crouching like a captive bird. But there was no soldier on guard. The real guard lurked somewhere in the shadows, in a place that the torchlight didn't reach.

How in the world had Orpheus managed to tame it?

'Don't forget, he read it out of a book,' Silvertongue had said. 'A book for children too, although I'm not sure that Fenoglio made the Night-Mare any less dangerous because of that. But it's made of words, and I'm sure that Orpheus himself used words to make it obey him. Just a few rearranged words, a couple of slightly twisted sentences, and the terror in the night becomes an obedient dog.'

But Silvertongue, Dustfinger had thought, have you forgotten that everything in this world is made of words? He knew only that this Night-Mare was not less dangerous, but even more sinister, than those found in the Wayless Wood. It would not,

like its fellows, be driven away by fairy dust and fire – it was woven of darker stuff. What a pity you didn't ask the White Women its name, he said to himself as he slowly made his way towards the cages. Don't the songs say that's the only way to kill a Night-Mare? For that was what he had to do: destroy the creature so that Orpheus could not call it back. Forget the songs, Dustfinger, he told himself as he looked around. Write your own, just as the Bluejay must write his now.

At the sound of his whispering the torches flared up as if to welcome him, weary of the darkness surrounding them. And Brianna raised her head.

How beautiful she was, as lovely as her mother.

Dustfinger looked around again, waiting for the darkness to start moving. Where was it?

He heard a snuffling sound, felt cold breath, panting like a large dog's. To his left the shadows grew and became blacker than black. His heart began to beat painfully fast. Ah. So the fear was still there, even though he so seldom felt it now.

Brianna got to her feet and stumbled away until her back was up against the bars. Behind her, a painted peacock spread its tail on the grey wall. 'Go away!' she whispered. 'Please! It will eat you!'

Go away. A tempting idea. But he had once had two daughters, now he had only one ... and he would keep her, not for ever but perhaps for a few years yet. Precious time. Time – whatever that was.

All was cold behind him, dreadfully cold. Dustfinger called up the flames and wrapped himself in their warmth, but the cold made the fire burn low and go out, leaving him alone with the shadow.

'Please! Please go away!' Brianna's voice urged, and the love in it, that she usually hid so well, warmed him more than the fire ever could. He called on the flames again, more sternly this time, reminding them that he and they were brothers,

inseparable. Hesitantly, they licked up from the ground, trembling as if a cold wind were blowing through them, but they burnt, and the Night-Mare retreated and stared at him.

Yes, what the songs said about him and his like was true. It must be true. The songs said Night-Mares were made entirely of the blackness of the soul, of evil that could not be forgotten or forgiven until they were snuffed out, consuming themselves and taking with them everything they had ever been.

The eyes transfixed him, red eyes in all that blackness, eyes both fierce and dull, lost in themselves, with no yesterday and no tomorrow, without light and warmth, caught in their own cold, the freezing entity of evil.

Dustfinger felt the fire around him like a warm fur. It almost burnt his skin, but it was his only protection against those dull eyes and the hungry mouth that opened, screaming so horribly that Brianna sank to her knees and put her hands over her ears.

The Night-Mare reached a black hand out to the fire. It hissed when he dipped it into the flames – and Dustfinger thought he recognized a face in all the blackness. A face he had never forgotten.

Was it possible? Had Orpheus seen it too, and so tamed his black dog by calling it by its forgotten name? Or had he given it that name himself, and brought back the man whom Silvertongue had sent to his death?’

Brianna was crying behind him. Dustfinger sensed her trembling through the bars, but he felt no fear now. He was just grateful. Grateful for this moment. Glad of this new encounter – which he hoped would be their last.

‘Well, look! Who have we here?’ he said softly, as Brianna’s weeping died down on the other side of the bars. ‘Do you remember yourself in all your darkness? Do you remember the knife, and the boy’s thin, unprotected back? Do you remember the sound my heart made when it broke?’

The Night-Mare stared at him, and Dustfinger stepped towards it, still surrounded by flames – flames burning hotter and hotter, nourished by all the pain and despair he was bringing back to mind.

‘Away with you, Basta!’ he said, speaking the name loud enough to pierce the heart of all the darkness. ‘Be gone for all eternity.’

The face showed more clearly – the narrow, foxy face that he had once feared so much – and Dustfinger made the flames bite into the cold, made them penetrate the blackness like swords, all of them writing Basta’s name, and the Night-Mare screamed again, its eyes suddenly full of memories. It screamed and screamed, while its shape ran like ink, melting into the shadows, dispersing like smoke. Only the cold was left, but the fire ate that too, and Dustfinger fell on his knees and felt the pain leaving him – pain that had outlasted death itself. He wished Farid were here with him. He wished it so much that, for a few moments, he forgot where he was.

‘Father?’ Brianna’s whisper reached him through the smoke.

Had she ever called him that before? Yes, long ago. But had he been the same man then?

The bars of the cage bent under the heat of his hands. He dared not touch Brianna because he felt the fire so strongly in them. Footsteps approached – heavy, rapid footsteps. The Night-Mare’s screams had brought them. But the darkness swallowed Dustfinger and Brianna up before the soldiers reached the cages, and they looked in vain for their black watchman.



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The Other Side

She tore a page from the book and ripped it in half.
Then a chapter.

Soon, there was nothing but scraps of words littered
between her legs and all around her ... What good
were the words?

She said it audibly now, to the orange-lit room. 'What
good are the words?'

Markus Zusak,
The Book Thief

The Black Prince was still with Roxane. She was going to splint his injured leg so that he could walk on it. Walk to the Castle in the Lake. 'We have time,' Meggie had told him, although her heart was in a hurry. Mo would certainly need as

long to bind this White Book as he had needed in the Castle of Night.

The Black Prince intended to set out with almost all his men to stand by the Bluejay. But without Elinor and without Meggie. ‘Your father made me promise that you and your mother would stay in a safe place,’ he had told her. ‘With your mother I wasn’t able to keep my promise, but at least I’ll keep it where you’re concerned. Didn’t you promise him the same thing?’

No, she had not. So she would go, even if it almost broke her heart to leave Doria behind. He still hadn’t woken up, but Darius would talk to him. And Elinor. And she would come back – wouldn’t she?

Farid was going with her. He would be able to call fire if the weather grew cold on their way, and she had stolen some dried meat and filled one of Battista’s leather bottles with water. How could the Black Prince think she would stay after she had seen those fiery words? How could he think she’d leave her father to die as if this were some other, quite different story?

‘Meggie, the Black Prince doesn’t know about the words,’ Fenoglio had pointed out. ‘And he has no idea what Orpheus is up to either!’ But Fenoglio did know, and all the same – just like the Prince – he didn’t want her to go. ‘Do you want what happened to your mother to happen to you too? No one knows where she is. No, you *must* stay. We’ll help your father in our own way. I’ll write day and night, I promise you. But what use is that if you don’t stay here to read what I’ve written?’

Stay here. Wait. No, she was sorry, but she was going to steal away in secret like Resa, and she wouldn’t get lost ... she’d waited far too long already. If Fenoglio did indeed think of something – and he had certainly been able to write the giant here – then Darius could read it, and the children had Battista and Elinor, Roxane and Fenoglio to look after them. But Mo was alone, all alone. He needed her. He’d always needed her.

Elinor was snoring gently. Darius slept next to her, in between Minerva's children. Meggie moved as quietly as the woven structure of the nest allowed, picking up her jacket, her shoes, and the rucksack that still reminded her of the other world.

'Ready?' Farid was standing in the round doorway of the nest. 'It will soon be light.'

Meggie nodded – and turned as Farid stared past her, his eyes as wide as a child's.

A White Woman was standing beside the sleepers. She looked at Meggie.

She had a pencil in her hand, a short, worn-out chalk pencil, and with a look of invitation she was offering Farid one of the candles that Elinor had brought from Ombra. Farid went towards her like a sleepwalker, and with a whisper lit the wick. The White Woman dipped her pencil into the flame and began to write on a sheet of paper. Meggie had been trying to write a good end to her father's story on it after the giant took Fenoglio away. The White Woman wrote and wrote, while Minerva whispered her husband's name in her sleep, while Elinor turned over on to her other side, while Despina put her arm around her brother and the wind blew through the wickerwork of the nest, almost putting out the candle. Then the White Woman straightened up, looked at Meggie once more, and disappeared as if the wind had blown her away.

Farid breathed a sigh of relief when she had gone, and pressed his face into Meggie's hair. But Meggie gently moved him aside and bent over the paper on which the White Woman had written.

'Can you read it?' Farid whispered.

Meggie nodded.

'Go to the Black Prince and tell him he can spare his leg,' she said softly. 'We'll all stay here. The song of the Bluejay has been written.'

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The Box

‘Okay,’ said the Lady, turning to Abby. ‘Tomorrow bring the book.’

‘Which one?’

‘There’s more than one book?’

Alan Armstrong,
Whittington

It wasn’t easy to make your hands work slowly when they loved what they were doing so much. Mo’s eyes stung in the bad light, his ankles were sore from the heavy chains, and yet in the strangest way he felt happy. It was as if he were binding not the Adderhead’s death, but time itself into a book – and with it all fears for the future, all the pain of the past ... until there was nothing left but *now*, this moment when his hands caressed paper and leather.

‘I’ll bring fire to help you as soon as I’ve freed Brianna,’ Dustfinger had promised, before leaving him alone to go and act the part of a traitor once more. ‘And I’ll bring the White Book with me,’ he had added.

However, it was not Dustfinger but Resa who came. Mo’s heart had almost stopped when the swift flew through the doorway. One of the guards had aimed his crossbow at her, but she darted away from the arrow, and Mo had plucked a brown feather from his shoulder. They haven’t found the Book. That was his first thought as the swift settled on a beam above him. But whatever happened, he was glad she was there.

The Piper was leaning against a column, his eyes following every movement Mo made. Was he going to try doing without sleep for two whole weeks? Or did he think this book could be bound in a day?

Mo put down his knife and rubbed his tired eyes. The swift spread her wings as if she were waving to him, and Mo quickly bent his head so that the Piper’s attention wouldn’t be drawn to her. But he looked up again when the silver-nosed man uttered a curse.

Fire was licking from the walls.

It could mean only one thing: Brianna was free.

‘Why are you smiling like that, Bluejay?’ The Piper came up to him and drove his fist into Mo’s stomach, doubling him up. The swift above their heads cried out.

‘Do you think your fiery friend will come to make amends for betraying you?’ the silver-nosed man whispered. ‘Don’t rejoice too soon! This time I’m going to chop his head off. We’ll see if he can come back from the dead without *that!*’

The Bluejay would have liked to thrust the bookbinder’s knife into that heartless breast, but once again Mo, the bookbinder, sent him away. What are you waiting for? asked the Jay. The White Book? No one’s going to find it! Well then, Mo retorted,

why should I fight any more? Without the Book I'm dead anyway, and so is my daughter.

Meggie. The bookbinder and the Bluejay were the same man only in sharing their fears for her.

The door opened, and a small, thin figure made its way into the fire-lit hall. Jacopo.

He came towards Mo, taking small steps. Did he want to tell the Bluejay about his mother? Or had his grandfather sent him to find out how Mo was getting on with binding the new Book?

Violante's son stopped close to Mo, but he was looking at the Piper.

'Will it soon be ready?' he asked.

'If you don't keep him from his work,' replied the silver-nosed man.

Jacopo put a hand under his tunic and brought out a book. He had wrapped it in a brightly-coloured cloth. 'I want the Bluejay to cure this book for me. It's my favourite.'

He opened it, and Mo forgot to breathe. Pages soaked in blood.

Jacopo was looking at him.

'Your favourite book? There's only one book the Bluejay's supposed to bother with. So get out!' The Piper poured himself a goblet of wine. 'Go to the kitchen and tell them to send up more meat and wine.'

'I only want him to take a look at it!' Jacopo's voice sounded as defiant as ever. 'Grandfather said I could get him to do that. You can ask him if you like.' He was passing Mo a short, worn pencil that could easily be hidden in the hand. That was better than the knife – much, much better.

The Piper put a piece of meat in his mouth and washed it down with wine. 'You're lying,' he said. 'Has your grandfather told you what I do to liars?'

‘No, what?’ Jacopo thrust his chin out just as his mother did and took a step towards the silver-nosed man.

The Piper wiped his greasy fingers on a snow-white napkin and smiled.

Mo clutched the pencil in his fingers and opened the White Book.

‘First I cut their tongues out,’ said the Piper.

Jacopo took another step towards him.

‘Oh yes?’

Heart.

Mo’s fingers shook as he traced each letter.

‘Yes. After all, it’s not easy to tell lies without a tongue. Although – wait, I did once know a mute beggar who told me shameless lies. He talked with his fingers.’

‘So?’

The Piper laughed. ‘So I cut them off, one by one.’

Keep looking up, Mo, or he’ll realize that you’re writing.

Spell.

Only one more word now. A single word.

The Piper glanced at him. He looked at the open book. Mo hid the pencil in his closed fist.

The swift spread her wings again. She wanted to help him. No, Resa! But the bird was already in the air, flying above the Piper’s head.

‘I saw that bird before!’ said Jacopo. ‘In my grandfather’s bedchamber.’

‘Did you indeed?’ The Piper looked at the ledge where the swift had now settled. He snatched a crossbow from one of the soldiers.

No! Resa, fly away!

Just one more word, but all Mo saw was the little bird.

The Piper shot, and the swift fluttered upwards. The arrow missed, and she flew straight into the Piper's face.

Write, Mo! He pressed the pencil down on to the blood-soaked paper.

The Piper's silver nose slipped when he struck out at the swift.

Death.



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White Night

The poor Emperor could hardly breathe. It was as if something were sitting on his breast. He opened his eyes and then he saw that it was Death ... and strange heads were looking out from the folds of the great velvet hangings of his bed, some of them horrible, some divinely beautiful: they were all the Emperor's good and bad deeds looking down on him now that Death sat there on his breast.

Hans Christian Andersen,
The Nightingale

The Adderhead was freezing. He was freezing even in his sleep, although he clutched the cushion to his sore chest, the cushion containing the Book that protected him from eternal cold. Even his dreams, heavy with poppy-juice, couldn't

warm him any more. Dreams of the tortures he would inflict on the Bluejay. Once he had dreamt only of love in this castle. But wasn't that only right and proper? Hadn't the love he found here tormented him as much as his rotting flesh?

Oh, how cold he was. Even his dreams seemed to be covered with hoarfrost. Dreams of torture, dreams of love. He opened his eyes, and the painted walls stared at him with the eyes of Violante's mother. That damn poppy-juice. This damn castle. And why was the fire back? The Adderhead groaned and pressed his hands to his eyes, but the sparks seemed to burn even beneath his lids.

Red. Red and gold. Light as sharp as a knife-blade, and out of the fire came the whispering, the whispering he had feared ever since he first heard it at a dying man's side. Trembling, he peered through his swollen fingers. No. No, it couldn't be true. It was the poppy-juice making him imagine them. Nothing else. He saw four of them all standing round his bed, white as snow – no, whiter – and they were whispering the name he had been born with. Over and over again, as if to remind him that he hadn't always had the skin of a serpent.

It was the poppy-juice, only the poppy-juice.

The Adderhead thrust a trembling hand into the cushion to take out the Book, to hold it up and so ward them off, but their white fingers were already reaching into his breast.

How they were looking at him! With the eyes of all the dead he had sent to them.

And then they whispered his name again.

And his heart stood still.



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77

Over

‘I did it!’ cried God. And he looked down at Sparrow and pointed at the vanishing marvel. ‘I did it! I made a Swift!’

**Ted Hughes,
*How Sparrow Saved the Birds, from The Dreamfighter***

The White Woman appeared as soon as Mo closed the blood-soaked Book again. At the sight of her the Piper forgot the swift, and Violante’s son hid under the table to which Mo was chained. But this daughter of Death hadn’t come to take the Bluejay away. She was here to give him his freedom, and Resa saw the relief on Mo’s face.

At that moment he forgot everything. Resa saw that too. Perhaps he hoped, for a split second, that the story had been told to the end at last. But the Piper hadn’t died with his

master. For a few precious moments fear held him transfixed, but when the White Woman disappeared she took his fear with her, and Resa spread her wings once more. She spat out the seeds as she flew at the Piper, so that she would get back hands she could use to help, feet that could run. But the bird was reluctant to leave her, and she still had claws as she landed on the flagstones right beside the two men.

Mo looked down at her in alarm, and before Resa could realize what danger she was putting him in, the Piper had taken the chains binding him to the table, to wind them around his own hand. Mo fell to his knees as the Piper tugged the chains. He was holding the knife he had been using to cut paper, but what good was a bookbinder's knife against a sword or a crossbow?

Desperately, Resa fluttered up on the table, retching in the frantic hope that there might be a seed still under her tongue, but her feathery prison would not let her go, and the Piper pulled at Mo's chains again.

'Your pale angel was in a hurry to leave this time!' he said scornfully. 'Why didn't she undo your chains for you? But don't worry, we'll leave you plenty of time to die, time enough for your white friends to come back again. Now, go on working.'

With difficulty, Mo straightened up. 'Why should I?' he asked, pushing the White Book over to the Piper. 'Your master won't be needing any second book now. That's why the White Woman came here. I've written the three words in this one. See for yourself. The Adderhead is dead.'

The Piper stared at the bloodstained binding. Then he looked under the table, where Jacopo was cowering like a small, frightened animal.

'Is he indeed?' he said, drawing his sword. 'Well, if that's so ... I've no objection to immortality myself. So, as I said, go on working.'

His soldiers began to whisper.

‘Quiet!’ the Piper snapped, pointing to one of them with his gloved hand. ‘You. Go to the Adderhead and tell him the Bluejay claims he’s dead.’

The soldier hurried away. The others watched him go with fear in their eyes. But the Piper put the point of his sword to Mo’s chest. ‘You’re not working yet!’

Mo stepped as far back as the chains would allow, the knife in his hand. ‘There won’t be any other book. No book with white pages. Off you go, Jacopo! Run to your mother and tell her everything will be all right.’

Jacopo crawled out from under the table and ran for it. The Piper didn’t even look at him as he disappeared. ‘When the Adderhead’s son was born I advised him to dispose of Cosimo’s little bastard,’ he said, looking at the White Book. ‘But he wouldn’t hear of it. Stupid of him.’

The soldier he had sent to the Adderhead came stumbling back into the dark hall, out of breath.

‘The Jay’s telling the truth!’ he gasped. ‘The Adderhead is dead, and the White Women are everywhere.’

The other soldiers lowered their crossbows.

‘L-l-let’s go back to Ombra, sir!’ stammered one of them. ‘This castle is bewitched. We can take the Bluejay with us!’

‘A good idea,’ said the Piper. And he smiled.

No.

Resa fluttered into his face once more, pecking the smile from his lips. It was the bird who did it – or was it the woman, the wife? She heard Mo cry out as the Piper struck at her with his sword. The blade cut deep into her wing. She fell, and suddenly she had human limbs again, as if the Piper had cut the bird out of her. The Piper stared at her in disbelief, but as he raised his sword Mo thrust the knife deep into his chest, right through his expensive clothes. And the Piper looked at him in astonishment as he died.

His soldiers, however, were still there. Mo snatched the Piper's sword and drove them back, away from his wife. But there were too many of them, and he was still chained to the table. Soon there was blood everywhere, on his chest, on his hands and arms. Was it his own?

They were going to kill him, and once again Resa could only watch, stand by and watch as she had done so often in the course of this story. But suddenly fire was consuming the chains and Dustfinger stood over her to protect her, with the marten on his shoulder. Beside him stood Jacopo.

'Is she dead too?' Resa heard him ask as the soldiers ran from the fire, screaming.

'No,' Dustfinger answered. 'It's only her arm that's wounded.'

'But she was a bird!' said Jacopo.

'Yes.' That was Mo's voice. 'Don't you think that sounds like a good story?'

It was suddenly so quiet in the great hall. No more fighting, no screams, only the crackling of the fire as it talked to Dustfinger.

Mo knelt down beside her. There was blood everywhere, but he was alive, and once again Resa had a human hand to take his. And all was well.



78

Staked on the Wrong Card

Like Orpheus I play death on the strings of life.

Ingeborg Bachmann,
To Speak of the Dark

Orpheus was reading frantically, he realized that himself. He was reading in too loud a voice, and much too fast. As if his tongue were trying to thrust the words through the bookbinder's body like knives. He had written him the torments of hell in revenge for the Piper's mocking smile. That smile still haunted him. How small it had made him, just when he was feeling so full of grandeur! But at least there'd soon be no more smiling for the Bluejay.

Ironstone stirred the ink and looked at him anxiously. His fury obviously showed on his face, written there in small beads of sweat.

Concentrate, Orpheus, he told himself – and tried again. There were a few words that he could hardly decipher because the letters ran together so unsteadily, drunk with his own rage.

Why did he feel as if he were reading the words into a void? Why did they seem like pebbles being dropped down a well, where their echo was lost in the darkness? Something was wrong. He'd never felt like this before when he was reading aloud.

'Ironstone!' he ordered the glass man. 'Run to the Hall of a Thousand Windows and see how the Bluejay is doing. He ought to be doubled up in agony like a poisoned dog by now.'

The glass man lowered the twig he was using to stir the ink and looked at him in alarm. 'But ... but master, I don't know the way.'

'Don't make such a stupid fuss, or do you want me to ask the Night-Mare if it fancies a glass man for a change? Turn right outside this room and then go straight ahead. Ask the guards the way!'

Unhappily, Ironstone set off. Silly creature! Fenoglio really might have thought up a less ridiculous kind of assistant to help scribes. But that was the trouble with this world – at heart, it was childish. Why had he loved the book so much when he was a child? Well, for that very reason! But now he was grown up, and it was time this world grew up too.

Another sentence – and once again the strange feeling that the words were dying away even before he spoke them. Damn it!

Dizzy with rage, he was reaching for the inkwell to throw it at the painted wall when he suddenly heard loud shouts outside. Orpheus put the inkwell back on the table and listened. What was all this? He opened his door and looked down the corridor. There were no guards outside the Adderhead's bedchamber any more, and two servants ran past him in a state

of great agitation. By all the devils in hell, what did this mean? And why was Dustfinger's fire burning on the walls again?

Orpheus hurried out into the passage and stopped outside the Adderhead's door. It was open, and the Silver Prince lay dead on his bed, his eyes open so wide that it wasn't difficult to guess what his last sight had been.

Instinctively, Orpheus looked round before he went up to the bed, but of course the White Women had left long ago. They had what they'd been waiting so long for. But how? How had it happened?

'Yes, you'll have to look for a new master, Four-Eyes!' Thumbling came out from behind the hangings of the bed and gave him a hawkish smile. Orpheus saw the ring that the Adderhead had used to seal death sentences on his lean hand. Thumbling was also wearing the Silver Prince's sword.

'Let's hope the stink washes out!' he murmured to Orpheus in a confidential tone as he flung his master's heavy velvet coat over his shoulders. Then he strode away, down the corridor where Dustfinger's fire whispered along the walls.

But Orpheus stood there feeling the tears run down his nose. All was lost! He'd staked everything on the wrong card; he'd put up with the stench of the rotting prince, bowed low to him and wasted his time in this dark castle all for nothing! It wasn't he who had written the last song but Fenoglio, who else could it have been? And presumably the Bluejay featured as the hero again, while Orpheus was the villain. No, worse! He played the ridiculous part of the loser!

He spat in the Adderhead's rigid face and stumbled back to his room, where the useless words still lay on the table. Trembling with rage, he picked up the inkwell and poured its contents over what he had written.

'Master, master! Have you heard?' The glass man, out of breath, was standing in the doorway. He was quick on his spidery legs, you had to give him that.

‘Yes, I know, the Adderhead’s dead! What about the Bluejay?’

‘They’re fighting! He and the Piper are fighting.’

‘Aha. Well, perhaps Silver-Nose may run him through yet. That would at least be something.’ Orpheus snatched up his things and stuffed them into the fine leather bag he had brought from Ombra: pens, parchment, even the empty inkwell, the silver candelabrum that the Adderhead had given him, and of course the three books – Jacopo’s, and the two about the Bluejay. He wasn’t giving up yet, not he.

He picked up the glass man and put him in the pouch at his belt.

‘What are you going to do, master?’ asked Ironstone anxiously.

‘We’ll summon the Night-Mare and get out of this castle!’

‘The Night-Mare’s gone, master! They say the Fire-Dancer sent it up in smoke!’

Damn, damn, damn. Of course. That was why fire was burning on the walls again! Dustfinger had recognized the Night-Mare. He had seen who was breathing there in the heart of darkness! Well, Orpheus, you’ll just have to read yourself another Night-Mare out of Jacopo’s book, he thought. It wasn’t all that difficult. Only this time he must give it a name that Dustfinger didn’t know!

He listened for sounds in the corridor. Nothing. The rats had deserted the sinking ship. The Adderhead was alone in death. Orpheus went back into the bedchamber where his bloated corpse lay and stole what silver he could find, but Thumbling hadn’t missed much. Then he hurried with the wailing glass man to the tunnel that had brought the Piper to the castle. Water was running down the stone walls as if the passage were sticking in the lake’s moist flesh like a thorn.

The guards posted on the bank to keep watch on the way out were gone, but a few dead soldiers lay among the rocks. In the

end they had clearly killed each other in their panic. Orpheus took a sword from one of the dead men, but threw it away again when he discovered how heavy it was. Instead he took a knife from another dead man's belt and put the soldier's coarse cloak over his shoulders. It might look ugly, but it was warm.

'Where are we going, master?' faltered Ironstone. 'Back to Ombra?'

'Why would we want to go back there?' was all that Orpheus replied, as he looked up at the dark slopes barring the way to the north.

To the north ... he had no idea what to expect there. As with so much else in his book, Fenoglio had written nothing about it, and that was just why he would go north. The mountains looked far from inviting, with their snowy peaks and bleak slopes. But it was the best way to go now that Ombra, he supposed, would soon belong to Violante and the Bluejay. To hell with that wretched bookbinder, to the hottest hell the human mind can imagine, he thought. And may Dustfinger freeze in eternal ice until his treacherous fingers break off!

Orpheus looked back at the bridge one last time before making for the trees. There went the Silver Prince's soldiers, running away. And what were they running away from? Two men and their white guardian angels. And their lord's bloated body.

'Master, master, couldn't you put me on your shoulder?

Suppose I fall out of this pouch?' the glass man wailed.

'Then I'll need a new glass man!' Orpheus replied.

Northward into unwritten country. Yes, he thought as his feet, with difficulty, sought a way up the steep slope. Maybe that part of this world will obey my words.



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79

Leaving

‘Tell me a story,’ says Alba, leaning against me like cold cooked pasta.

I put my arm around her. ‘What kind of story?’

‘A good story. A story about you and Mama ...’

‘Hmm. Okay. Once upon a time—’

‘When was that?’

‘All times at once. A long time ago, and right now.’

Audrey Niffenegger,
The Time Traveller’s Wife

The Piper’s sword had cut deep into Resa’s arm, but Brianna had learnt a good deal from her mother, even though she liked singing to Violante better than growing herbs in stony fields.

‘The arm will heal,’ she said as she bound up the wound. But the bird would never leave Resa now. Silvertongue knew that as well as Dustfinger.

The Piper had done his best to send the Bluejay after his master to his death. He had wounded him in the shoulder and on the left arm, but in the end he alone had followed the Adderhead, and Dustfinger made the fire consume both his body and his master’s.

Pale-faced, Violante stood at Silvertongue’s side as the Adderhead and the Piper turned to ashes. She looked younger, as if she had shed a few years in the cell where her father had flung her – almost as forlorn as a child – yet when she turned away at last from the fire devouring her father, she put her arm around her son. Dustfinger had never seen her do a thing like that before. Everyone still disliked Jacopo, though he had saved them all. Even Silvertongue with his soft heart felt the same, though he was ashamed of it. Dustfinger saw it in his face.

There were still a dozen of Violante’s child soldiers alive. They found them in the dungeon cells, but the Adderhead’s soldiers had all gone, like the White Women. Only their abandoned tents still stood on the banks of the lake, with the black coach and a few riderless horses. Jacopo claimed that his great-grandfather’s man-eating fish had come up from the lake and eaten some of the men as they ran for their lives over the bridge. Neither Silvertongue nor Violante believed him, but Dustfinger went out on to the bridge and found a few shimmering scales on the wet stones, as large as linden leaves. So they didn’t take the bridge, but left the Castle in the Lake along the tunnel down which the Piper had come.

It was snowing when they stepped out into the open, and the castle disappeared behind them among the swirling snowflakes as if it were dissolving into the whiteness. The world around them was as still as if it had used up all words, as if all the tales there were to tell in this world had now been told. Dustfinger found Orpheus’s tracks in the frozen mud of the bank, and

Silvertongue looked at the trees into which they disappeared as if he could still hear Orpheus's voice inside him.

'I wish he were dead,' he said quietly.

'A clever wish,' replied Dustfinger. 'But I'm afraid it's too late to make it come true.' He had looked for Orpheus after the Piper was dead, but his room had been empty, like Thumblings'. The world looked so bright this cold morning. They were all so light at heart. But the darkness remained, and would go on telling its part of the story.

They caught some of the horses left behind by the Adderhead's men. Although weakened by his wounds, Silvertongue was in a hurry. *At least let's save our daughters.*

'The Black Prince will have been looking after Meggie,' Dustfinger told him, but the anxiety was still on his face as they rode further and further south.

They were a silent company, all caught up in their own thoughts and memories. Only Jacopo sometimes raised his clear voice, as demanding as ever. 'I'm hungry.' 'I'm thirsty.' 'When will we be there?' 'Do you think the Milksop has killed the children and the robbers?' His mother always answered him, although often abstractedly. The Castle in the Lake had spun a bond between them out of shared fear and dark memories, and perhaps the strongest strand of it was the fact that Jacopo had done what his mother intended to do when she rode to the castle. The Adderhead was dead. But Dustfinger felt sure that, all the same, Violante would feel her father behind her like a shadow all her life – and very likely Her Ugliness knew it herself by now.

Silvertongue took the Bluejay away with him too. It seemed as if the two of them were riding side by side, and not for the first time Dustfinger wondered whether they were only two sides of the same man. Whatever the answer was, the bookbinder loved this world as much as the robber did.

On the first night, when they stopped to rest under a tree with furry yellow catkins falling from its bare branches, the swift came back, although Resa had thrown the last of the seeds into the lake. She changed shape in her sleep and flew up into the flowering branches, where moonlight painted her plumage silver. When Dustfinger saw her sitting there he woke Silvertongue, and they waited under the tree together until the swift flew down again at dawn and turned back into a woman there between them.

‘What will become of the child?’ she asked, full of dread.

‘It will dream of flying,’ Silvertongue replied. Just as the bookbinder dreamt of the robber, and the robber of the bookbinder, and the Fire-Dancer dreamt of the flames and the minstrel woman who could dance like them. Perhaps, after all, this world was made of dreams, and an old man had merely found the words for them.

Resa wept when they came to the cave and found it empty, but Dustfinger discovered the Strong Man’s sign outside the entrance, drawn on the rocks in soot, and buried underneath it was a message obviously left by Doria for his big brother. Dustfinger had heard of the tree with the nests in it that Doria described, but he had never seen it with his own eyes.

It took them two days to find the tree, and Dustfinger was the first to see the giant. He took Silvertongue’s reins, and Resa put her hand to her mouth in alarm. But Violante stared at the giant like an enchanted child.

He was holding Roxane in his hand as if she too were a bird. Brianna went pale at the sight of her mother between those mighty fingers, but Dustfinger dismounted and went up to the giant.

The Black Prince was standing between the giant’s vast legs, with the bear beside him. He was limping as he went to meet Dustfinger, but he looked happier than he had for a long time.

‘Where’s Meggie?’ asked Silvertongue as the Prince hugged him, and Battista pointed up into the tree. Dustfinger had never seen such a tree before, not even in the wild heart of the Wayless Wood, and he wanted to climb up to the nests at once and see the branches covered with frost-flowers where the women and children perched like birds.

Meggie’s voice called her father’s name, and Silvertongue went to meet her as she let herself down the trunk on a rope, as naturally as if she had always lived in the trees. But Dustfinger turned and looked up at Roxane. She whispered something to the giant, who put her down on the ground as carefully as if he believed she was made of glass. Roxane. He vowed never to forget her name again. He would ask the fire to write its letters in his heart so that not even the White Women could wash it away. Roxane. Dustfinger held her in his arms, and the giant looked down at them with eyes that seemed to reflect all the colours in the world.

‘Look around,’ Roxane whispered to him, and Dustfinger saw Silvertongue embracing his daughter and wiping the tears off her face. He saw the bookworm woman running to Resa – how in the name of all the fairies did she come to be here? – Tullio burying his furry face in Violante’s skirt, the Strong Man almost smothering Silvertongue in his bear hug ... and ...

Farid.

He stood there digging his toes into the newly fallen snow. He still went barefoot, and surely he’d grown taller?

Dustfinger went up to him. ‘I see you’ve taken good care of Roxane,’ he said. ‘Did the fire obey you while I was gone?’

‘It always obeys me!’ Yes, he had grown older. ‘I fought Sootbird.’

‘Imagine that!’

‘My fire ate his fire.’

‘Did it indeed?’

‘Yes! I climbed up on the giant and made fire rain down on Sootbird. And then the giant broke his neck.’

Dustfinger couldn’t help smiling, and Farid returned his smile. ‘Do you ... do you have to go away again?’ He looked as anxious as if he feared the White Women were already waiting.

‘No,’ said Dustfinger, smiling again. ‘No, not for a while, I think.’

Farid. He’d ask the fire to write that name in his heart as well. Roxane. Brianna. Farid. And Gwin, of course.



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Ombra

What if this road, that has held no surprises
These many years, decided not to go
Home after all; what if it could turn
Left or right with no more ado
Than a kite-tail? What if its tarry skin
Were like a long, supple bolt of cloth,
that is shaken and rolled out, and takes
a new shape from the contours beneath?
And if it chose to lay itself down
In a new way; around a blind corner,
across hills you must climb without knowing
what's on the other side; who would not hanker
to be going, at all risks? Who wants to know
a story's end, or where a road will go.

**Sheenagh Pugh,
*What If This Road***

When the Black Prince took the children back to Ombra snow lay on the battlements above the city wall, but the women threw flowers they had made out of scraps of fabric cut from old clothes. The lion emblem waved from the city towers again, but now his paw was laid on a book with blank pages, and his mane was made of fire. The Milksop had gone. He had fled from the giant, not to Ombra, but straight to the Castle of Night and his sister's arms, and Violante had returned to take possession of the city and prepare it for the return of its children.

Meggie was standing with Elinor, Darius and Fenoglio in the square outside the castle gates as the mothers hugged their sons and daughters, and Violante, speaking from the battlements, thanked the Black Prince and the Bluejay for saving them.

‘You know what, Meggie?’ Fenoglio whispered to her, as Violante had provisions from the castle kitchens distributed to the women. ‘Maybe Her Ugliness will fall in love with the Black Prince some day. After all, he was the Bluejay before your father took the part, and Violante was more in love with the role than the man anyway!’

Oh, Fenoglio! He was just the same as ever. Although the giant had gone back to his mountains long ago, he had completely restored the old man's self-confidence.

The Bluejay had not come to Ombra. Mo and Resa had stayed behind at the farm where they had once lived. ‘Let the Bluejay go back to where he came from,’ he had told the Prince. ‘Into the strolling players’ songs.’ They were singing them everywhere already: how the Jay and the Fire-Dancer, all by themselves, had defeated the Adderhead and the Piper with all their men ...

‘Please, Battista,’ Mo had said, ‘why don’t *you*, at least, write a song telling the true story? About the people who helped the Jay and the Fire-Dancer. About the swift – and the boy!’

Battista had promised Mo to write a song like that, but Fenoglio only shook his head. ‘No one will sing it, Meggie. People don’t like their heroes to need help, particularly not from women and children.’

No doubt he was right. Perhaps that meant Violante would have a hard time on the throne of Ombra, although all its people were cheering her today. Jacopo stood beside his mother. He looked more like a small copy of his father every day, but all the same he still reminded Meggie even more of his sinister grandfather. She shuddered to think how ready Jacopo had been to deliver the Adderhead up to Death – even though that had been the saving of Mo.

Another widow now ruled the country on the far side of the forest, and she too had a son and was taking care of the throne for him. Meggie knew that Violante expected war, but no one wanted to think of that today. This day belonged to the children who had come home. Not one of them was missing, and the strolling players sang about Farid’s fire, the tree full of nests, and the giant who had so mysteriously come out of the mountains at just the right moment.

‘I’ll miss him,’ Elinor had whispered as he disappeared among the trees, and Meggie felt the same. She would never forget how the Inkworld was reflected on his skin, or how light-footed he was when he strode away, so gentle in such a big body.

‘Meggie!’ Farid made his way through the women and children. ‘Where’s Silvertongue?’

‘With my mother,’ she replied – and was surprised to find that her heart beat no faster than usual at the sight of him. When had that changed?

Farid frowned. ‘Yes, yes,’ he said, ‘and Dustfinger’s with his minstrel woman again. He kisses her so often you might think

her lips tasted of honey.'

Oh dear. Farid was still jealous of Roxane.

'I think I'll go away for a while,' he said.

'Go away? Where to?'

Behind Meggie, Elinor and Fenoglio began arguing over something Elinor didn't like about the look of the castle. Those two loved arguing with each other, and they had plenty of opportunity for arguments because they were neighbours now. The bag in which Elinor had packed all kinds of things that might come in useful in the Inkworld, including her silver cutlery, was still standing in her house in the other world ('Well, I was very excited, it's easy to forget such things then!'), but fortunately she had been wearing the Loredan family jewels when Darius read them both over, and Rosenquartz had sold them for her so cleverly ('Meggie, you've no idea what a shrewd businessman that glass man is!') that now she was the proud possessor of a house in the street where Minerva lived.

'Where to?' Farid made a fiery flower grow between his fingers and placed it on Meggie's dress. 'Oh, I think I'll just stroll from village to village the way Dustfinger used to.'

Meggie looked at the burning flower. The flames faded like real petals, and only a tiny spot of ash was left on her dress. Farid. His mere name used to quicken her pulse, but now she hardly listened as he told her about his plans, all the marketplaces where he would put on a show, the mountain villages, the far side of the Wayless Wood. Her heart leapt only when she suddenly saw the Strong Man standing there with the women. A few of the children had climbed on to his shoulders, just as they often used to in the cave, but she couldn't see the face she was looking for beside him. Disappointed, she let her eyes wander on, and blushed when Doria was suddenly standing there in front of her. Farid abruptly fell silent, and looked at the other boy in the same way as he so often looked at Roxane.

The scar on Doria's forehead was as long as Meggie's middle finger. 'A blow with a spiked mace, not particularly well aimed,' Roxane had said. 'Head wounds bleed a lot, so they probably thought he was dead.' Roxane had nursed him for many nights on end, but Fenoglio's opinion was still that Doria was alive thanks only to the story he had written long ago about the boy's future. 'And anyway, even if you want to believe it was Roxane who made him better, then who made up Roxane, may I ask?' He was certainly his old self again.

'Doria! How are you?' Meggie involuntarily put out her hand and caressed the scar on his forehead. Farid gave her a strange look.

'Fine. My head's as good as new.' Doria brought something out from behind his back. 'Is this what they're like?'

Meggie stared at the tiny wooden aeroplane he had made.

'That's how you described them, isn't it? The flying machines.'

'But you were unconscious!'

He smiled and put his hand to his head. 'The words are in here, all the same. But I don't know how the music thing is supposed to work. You know, the little box that plays music.'

Meggie had to smile. 'Oh yes, a radio. That wouldn't be any good here. I don't know just how to explain it to you ...'

Farid was still looking at her. Then he abruptly took her hand. 'Excuse us,' he told Doria, and led Meggie into the nearest house entrance with him. 'Does Silvertongue know how you look at him?'

'Look at who?'

'Who!' He passed his finger over his forehead as if tracing Doria's scar. 'Listen,' he said, stroking her hair back. 'Why don't you come with me? We could go from village to village together. The way we did when we and Dustfinger were following your mother and father. Do you remember?'

How could he ask that?

Meggie looked over her shoulder. Doria was standing beside Fenoglio and Elinor. Fenoglio was looking at the aeroplane.

'I'm sorry, Farid,' she said, gently removing his hand from her shoulder. 'But I don't want to leave.'

'Why not?' He tried to kiss her, but Meggie turned her face away. Even though she felt tears coming to her eyes. *Do you remember?*

'I wish you luck,' she said, kissing him on the cheek. He still had the most beautiful eyes of any boy she'd ever seen. But now her heart beat so much faster for someone else.





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Later

Almost five months later a baby will be born at the lonely farm where the Black Prince once hid the Bluejay. It will be a boy, dark-haired like his father, but with his mother's and sister's eyes. He will think that every wood is full of fairies, that a glass man sleeps on every table – so long as there's some parchment on it – that books are written by hand, and the most famous of illuminators paints with his left hand because his right hand is made of leather. He will think that strolling players breathe fire and perform comic plays in every marketplace, that women always wear long dresses, and soldiers stand at every city gate.

And he will have an aunt called Elinor who tells him there's a world which is not like this one. A world with neither fairies nor glass men, but with animals who carry their young in a pouch in front of their bellies, and birds with wings that beat so

fast it sounds like the humming of a bumblebee, with carriages that drive along without any horses, and pictures that move of their own accord. Elinor will tell him how, long ago, a horrible man called Orpheus brought his parents out of that world and into this one by magic, and how this Orpheus finally had to flee from his father and the Fire-Dancer to the northern mountains, where it's to be hoped he froze to death. She will tell him that even the most powerful men don't carry swords in the other world, but there are much, much more terrible weapons there. (His father owns a very fine sword, kept wrapped in a cloth in his workshop. He hides it from the child, but sometimes the boy will secretly unwrap it and runs his fingers over the shiny blade.) Elinor will tell him amazing things about that other world. She will even claim that the people there have built coaches that can fly, but he doesn't really believe that, although Doria has made wings for his sister, and Meggie really did fly from the city wall to the river wearing them. The boy laughed at her, all the same, for he knows more about flying than Meggie. That's because he sometimes grows wings at night, and he and his mother fly up into the trees. But perhaps he's just dreaming it. He dreams it almost every night, but he'd like to see the flying coaches all the same, and the animals with pouches, the moving pictures, and the house that Elinor is always talking about. A house full of books not written by any hand, and the books are sad, because they're waiting for Elinor.

'Some day we'll go and visit them together,' Elinor often says, and Darius nods. Darius can tell wonderful stories too, about flying carpets and genies in bottles. 'Some day the three of us will go back, and then I'll show you all these things.'

And the boy runs to the workshop where his father is making leather clothes for books that are often illustrated with pictures painted by the famous Balbulus himself, and says, 'Mo!' He always calls his father Mo, he doesn't know why, perhaps because that's what his sister calls him. 'When are we going to the other world, the one you came from?'

And his father puts him on his lap and runs his fingers through his dark hair, and says, like Elinor, 'I'm sure we will some day. But we'd need words for that, exactly the right words, because only the right words unlock the doors between worlds, and the only person who could write them for us is a lazy old man. What's more, I'm afraid he's getting more forgetful every day.'

Then he tells him about the Black Prince and his bear, the giants that they'll go and see someday, and the new tricks the Fire-Dancer has taught the flames. And the boy will see, in his father's eyes, that he is very happy and not at all homesick for the other world. Any more than his sister is. Or his mother.

So the boy will think that perhaps he'll have to go alone one day, if he wants to see that world. And he'll have to find out which old man his father means, because there are several in Ombra. Maybe he means the one who has two glass men and writes songs for the strolling players and for Violante whom everyone calls Her Kindliness, and who is much better liked than her son. Battista calls this old man Inkweaver, and Meggie sometimes goes to see him. Maybe he'll go with her next time, so that he can ask him for the words that open doors. Because it must be exciting in that other world, much more exciting than in his own ...



An A–Z of the Inkworld

Adderhead, *also known as the Silver Prince*

The most cruel prince in the Inkworld, a warmongering tyrant who fears only death. Violante's father. Also known as the Adder. Wears rubies at the corners of his nostrils. Lives in the Castle of Night. In *Inkspell*, Mo binds the White Book for him, thereby granting him immortality, but by *Inkdeath* he is diseased, rotting, and desperate for a cure.

Anselmo

A young guard at the gates of Ombra Castle.

Badger's Earth

One of the robbers' hideouts.

Balbulus

Master illuminator of manuscripts at Ombra Castle. His right hand is cut off by the Piper as a punishment.

Barn Owl

Physician and friend to Dustfinger. Founder of the infirmary near the Castle of Night, later in Ombra.

Basta

One of Capricorn's most devoted henchmen. Superstitious and obsessed with his knife, he once slashed Dustfinger's face,

leaving the fire-eater scarred. At the end of *Inkheart*, he made his escape, followed by Capricorn's mother, Mortola.

Battista

A strolling player, a mask-maker, disfigured by pockmarks.

Bear

The Black Prince's constant companion.

Bella

Healer in the Barn Owl's infirmary.

Benedicta

Minstrel woman.

Black Prince

King of the strolling players, leader of the Motley Folk and, later, of the noble robbers. A master knife-thrower, secretive champion of the poor, and Dustfinger's best friend from long ago. Accompanied wherever he goes by his faithful black bear. Also known simply as the Prince.

Bluejay

A legendary robber made up by Fenoglio. Recognizable by the scar on his left arm. The subject of many heroic songs. In *Inkdeath*, Mo—Fenoglio's inspiration for the character—takes over the name and the part. Also called the Jay.

Brianna

Willful daughter of Dustfinger and Roxane. Paramour of Cosimo the Fair. Worked for Violante as a maid until she was cast out for betraying her with her husband. Later worked for Orpheus.

Capricorn

The brutal leader of a gang of mercenary fire-raisers and extortionists, he was read out of the pages of *Inkheart* and into our world by Mo. Unlike Dustfinger, Capricorn was happy to escape the story and made it his mission to burn every remaining copy of the book in an attempt to prevent ever being read back into it. But eventually, with the help of Meggie and Fenoglio, he is destroyed by Mo. Son of Mortola.

Capricorn's Fortress

The hideout of Capricorn's robbers and fire-raisers in the Wayless Wood. The place where Mo and Resa first enter the Inkworld, and where Mortola wounds Mo.

Capricorn's Village

An isolated place in Liguria, Italy, where the final showdown of *Inkheart* takes place.

Carandrella

A deserted village below the strolling players' graveyard.

Carla

Assistant in the Barn Owl's infirmary.

Castle in the Lake

Childhood home of Violante's mother. Approached by the mist-covered Impregnable Bridge. Appears to float on the Black Lake, which is also known as the Giants' Mirror because the enormous creatures once came there to gaze at their reflections in the water. The castle has a window-less, multitowered façade, but the walls of some of the rooms inside are painted with wonderful, picture-book scenes, and the Hall of a Thousand Windows in the west wing is flooded with daylight. Scene of the final struggle in *Inkdeath*.

Castle of Night

The Adderhead's castle, where Mo binds the White Book in *Inkspell*.

Cerberus

Orpheus's slaving dog.

Cloud-Dancer

Strolling player. Former tightrope-walker. Message-carrier and friend of Dustfinger. Killed by Basta in *Inkspell*.

Cosimo the Fair

Beautiful son of the Laughing Prince. Violante's husband, Jacopo's father, Brianna's true love. Dies twice in *Inkspell*, which is why Dustfinger mentions seeing him twice when he, too, is dead.

Dana

One of Orpheus's maids. Not especially pretty, but nice. Fond of Farid.

Darius, also known as Stumbletongue

Capricorn's reader in *Inkheart*, he, like Mo and Meggie, possesses the ability to read characters out of stories, but he damages them if he stutters over the words. Becomes Elinor's librarian after Capricorn is vanquished.

Despina

Minerva's daughter.

Doria

One of the youngest members of the robbers' camp. A good spy. Half brother of Lazaro, the Strong Man. Friend of Luc. A

fledgling inventor in spite of two stiff fingers on his left hand. In love with Meggie.

Dustfinger, *also known as Fire-Dancer*

Scar-faced fire-eater who has wandered between the two worlds. First husband of Roxane, father of Brianna. Lived for ten years in the real world after Mo accidentally read him out of the pages of *Inkheart*. At the end of the first book, he steals the last remaining copy from Mo. Sacrifices his life for his apprentice Farid's in *Inkspell*. Rarely without his tame marten, Gwin.

Elinor Loredan

Resa's aunt, Meggie's great-aunt. An avid book collector. She once preferred her books to the company of others, but she came to welcome Meggie, Mo, Resa, and Darius into her home. Opinionated, tart-tongued, and prone to speaking her mind! Once in the Inkworld, she prompts Fenoglio to reclaim control of his own story.

Fabio

A child of the strolling players.

Farid

A boy read out of *Tales of the Arabian Nights* by Mo. Nimble and quick-witted, he has a talent for petty theft, which he developed in his original story. Often barefoot! Devoted to Dustfinger; determined at first, in *Inkspell*, to learn the Fire-Dancer's craft of fire-eating, and later, in *Inkdeath*, to bring him back from the dead. Also in imitation of Dustfinger, he has his own marten, Jink. Fond of Meggie.

Fenoglio, *also known as Inkweaver*

Inventor of the Inkworld, author of the book *Inkheart*, from which Dustfinger came. Also known, by Jacopo, as Tortoise-Face. Disappears into his own story when Meggie reads the Shadow out of the Inkworld to defeat Capricorn. After the tragic turn of events in *Inkspell*, stops writing the story and lets it take its own course. In *Inkdeath*, Resa, Elinor, and others encourage him to try to set it right again.

Firefox

Capricorn's successor who becomes the Adderhead's herald in *Inkspell*. Dead by the time *Inkdeath* begins.

Folchart

Family surname of Mo, Meggie, and Resa.

Gwin

Dustfinger's pet, a horned marten, originally intended by Fenoglio to play a fatal part in the tale of *Inkheart*.

Henchmen

Cockerell, Flatnose, Fulvio, Humpback, and Pitch-Eater are among Capricorn's henchmen in *Inkheart*. See also Basta, Slasher.

Infirmmary

Where the Barn Owl tends and nurses the sick. A place of refuge near the Castle of Night.

Inkheart

Fenoglio's book. Capricorn wants the last copy so that he can never be read back into the story; Orpheus wants it so that he can, to experience the Inkworld.

Ironstone

Orpheus's gray-colored glass man. Older brother of Jasper.

Ivo

Minerva's son.

Jacopo

Son of Violante and Cosimo; the Adderhead's grandson. Petulant and spoiled. Plays a pivotal role in the conclusion of *Inkdeath*.

Jasper

Orpheus's other, rosy-colored glass man. Younger brother of Ironstone. Farid's friend.

Jehan

Roxane's son by her second husband, who is now dead.

Jink

Farid's horned marten.

Laughing Prince, also known as the Prince of Sighs

Lord of the castle and country of Ombra. Father of Cosimo the Fair, father-in-law of Violante. Known as the Prince of Sighs after his son dies in *Inkspell*. Poisoned by the Adderhead, the prince himself also dies in *Inkspell*.

Lianna

Little girl; a child of the strolling players.

Luc

Young robber. Doria's friend; the two are spared from hanging in *Inkdeath*.

Meggie Folchart

Daughter of Mo and Resa. Like her father, has the magical ability to bring characters out of books by reading aloud. After meeting Fenoglio, the author of *Inkheart*, she also dreams of being able to write as well as she can read—so that she can not only bring characters in and out of books but also script their fates. Fair-haired. Infatuated with Farid at the start of *Inkdeath*.

Merle

Another child of the strolling players.

Milksop

The brother of the Adderhead's fifth wife. Now Governor of Ombra.

Mina

Minstrel woman, pregnant in *Inkspell*.

Minerva

Fenoglio's kindly landlady in Ombra. Mother of Despina and Ivo.

Mortimer Folchart, *also known as Mo, Silvertongue, the Bluejay, and the Jay*

Bookbinder or book “doctor.” Resa's husband and Meggie's father. Also called Silvertongue because of his ability to make characters come alive by reading them out of books—to “paint pictures in the air with his voice”—although he has been wary of this gift ever since experiencing its awful consequences in *Inkheart*, when he reads Dustfinger, Capricorn, and Basta into our world and nearly loses his wife, Resa, forever to the Inkworld in exchange. In *Inkdeath*, Mo assumes the part of the Bluejay, a valiant yet murderous thief character created by Fenoglio, and he soon finds it difficult to distinguish between

his true self and his alias. He shares the fictional Bluejay's scar on his left arm, and was wounded near his heart by Mortola.

Mortola, *also known as the Magpie*

Capricorn's mother. Known as the Magpie due to her ability to shape-shift into a bird. A poisoner, she kept Resa enslaved for many years in the Inkworld. In *Inkdeath*, she aligns herself with Orpheus to avenge her son: Her greatest wish is to see Mo punished for killing Capricorn.

Moss-women

Healers.

Motley Folk

A loyal band of entertainers to which Dustfinger once belonged before he was abruptly read into our world by Mo. The strolling players of the Inkworld: conjurors, tightrope-walkers, fire-eaters, knife-throwers. Led by the Black Prince.

Nettle

Healer who uses herbs and potions to cure the sick.

Ombra

The city and castle of Ombra, one of the central locations in *Inkspell*.

Orpheus, *also known as Calf's-Head, Cheeseface, Milkface, Moonface, and Four-Eyes*

Discovered in our world by Dustfinger, this oily fellow has the same ability as Mo and Meggie to read characters in and out of books. An ardent admirer of *Inkheart*—perhaps the tale's most passionate fan—and also a writer, though he lacks true vision and instead uses his modest skills mostly to increase his fortune and secure his power. Owner of the dog Cerberus.

Oss, *also known as the Chunk*

Orpheus's dumb and brutish bodyguard. Enjoys abusing Farid.

Paula

Fenoglio's granddaughter.

Piper, *also known as Silvernose*

Capricorn's minstrel; now serves the Adderhead. He wears a silver nose because his real nose was cut off by the father of a woman he seduced.

Pippo

Fenoglio's grandson.

Prince of Salt

Maternal grandfather of Violante.

Resa (Theresa) Folchart

Mo's wife, Meggie's mother, and Elinor's favorite niece. She spent many years mute and enslaved by the evil Mortola after Mo unknowingly read her into *Inkheart*. Resa returns to the Inkworld in search of Meggie in *Inkspell*. By *Inkdeath*, she and Mo are expecting a second child, and she wishes to return to our world, even though the rest of her family does not. By following the dangerous craft she learned as the Magpie's servant, she, too, shape-shifts into a bird—a swift—in an effort to save Mo and Dustfinger at the Castle in the Lake.

Rico

Fenoglio's grandson.

Robbers

Blackbeard, Charcoal-Burner, Elfbane, Gecko, Grabber, Hedgehog, Hobo, Silkworm, Swindler, and Twofingers are among the band of robbers in *Inkdeath*. See also Snapper, Woodenfoot.

Rosanna

Youngest daughter of Roxane and Dustfinger; died of a fever while Dustfinger was stranded in our world.

Rosenquartz

Fenoglio's peevish, put-upon, pink-colored glass man. Appreciative of Elinor's frankness toward the author once she arrives in the Inkworld!

Roxane

Dustfinger's wife, and a great beauty, with raven hair and alabaster skin. Mother of Brianna, Rosanna, and Jehan. Once a minstrel woman, she is now a healer and herbalist.

Sandro

One of Violante's child-soldiers.

Shadow

Known as Capricorn's Hound in *Inkdeath*. A being whose touch, and even breath, brings death.

Slasher

Formerly Capricorn's fire-raiser, now the Adderhead's henchman.

Snapper

Robber, writer, and follower of the Black Prince. Saves Doria and Luc from hanging in *Inkdeath*.

Sootbird

Strolling player and unconvincing fire-eater. An informant to the Adderhead in *Inkspell*; serves the Milksop in *Inkdeath*.

Spelt-Mill

Scene of a terrible act of treachery in *Inkspell*.

Strong Man

Strolling player and robber, named Lazaro. One of the Black Prince's most loyal companions; accompanies Resa on her dangerous journey to the Castle in the Lake. Older, half brother of Doria.

Sugar, also known as the Wardrobe-Man

Servant of Mortola and then of Orpheus. A huge hired thug with rotten teeth.

Susa

Dead sister of Doria and Lazaro, buried in the graveyard of the strolling players.

Taddeo

Librarian in the Castle of Night.

Thumbling

The Adderhead's bodyguard, notorious for cutting a thumb off every man he kills and turning the bone into a little-pipe to mock the Piper.

Tullio

Furry-faced page of the Laughing Prince; loyal to Violante.

Violante, also known as Her Ugliness

Daughter of the Adderhead, widow of Cosimo the Fair, mother of Jacopo. Her cruel nickname can be attributed to a large birthmark on her left cheek. Once heir to the realms of both Lombrica and Argenta, she despises her immortal father and plots his demise, recruiting an army of child-soldiers and enlisting the aid of the Bluejay in her scheme.

Vito

The eldest of Violante's child-soldiers.

Wayless Wood

The forest south of Ombra, the place where Meggie and Farid arrive in the Inkworld.

White Book, *also known as the Book*

Bound for the Adderhead by Mo in *Inkspell* to give him immortality.

White Women

The servants of Death.

Woodenfoot

Robber with a stiff leg—not a fast runner, but a good cook.

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A note from the author:

INKDEATH came to life in my new home in Los Angeles. For the first time, I had enough room to put up all the photographs and paintings that inspired me to write. Hundreds of notes with ideas and plot points covered my bookshelves (yes, I also had room for my books!), and in front of the windows my son played.

When I sat down to write the first chapter, it felt like meeting up with very old friends. In the story, only two months have passed since Dustfinger's death and so it felt for me. But once again, I was surprised. Mo had become the Bluejay, much more than I had expected, and INKDEATH soon became as great a writing adventure as INKHEART and INKSPELL. As an author, I especially enjoyed the Fenoglio chapters (and I hope you'll like that he has two more glassmen to help him).

Some of you may know that Rolf, my husband of twenty-six years, became sick and died shortly before I finished this book. You may wonder if the loss and the grief my children and I felt made me write a story that deals so much with death. But it's not true. The story was told already, and only a few lines felt wrong and had to be rewritten.

*I am the song that sings the bird.
I am the leaf that grows the land.
I am the tide that moves the moon.
I am the stream that halts the sand.
I am the cloud that drives the storm.
I am the earth that lights the sun.
I am the fire that strikes the stone.
I am the clay that shapes the hand.
I am the word that speaks the man.*

Charles Causley, *I Am the Song*



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